

# IN EVERY ISSUE

## THE RED PENCIL

*CINDY VALLAR analyzes the work behind finished manuscripts. In this issue, she profiles HELEN HOLLICK'S Forever Queen.*

*Emma was uncertain whether it was a growing need to visit the privy or the remaining queasiness of mal de mer, seasickness, that was making her feel so utterly dreadful. Or was it the man waiting at the top of the steps? The way he was looking at her, with the intensity of a hunting hawk, that was so unsettling? A man she had never seen until this moment, who was four and thirty years to her thirteen, spoke a language she barely understood and who, from the morrow was to be her wedded husband.*

*Spring. Three days after the celebration of the Easter Mass, in the year of Christ 1002. Her brother had agreed to this marriage of alliance between England and his Duchy of Normandy for reasons of his own gain. Richard ruled Normandy, and his brood of sisters, with an iron will that imaged their father's ruthless determination. Their father, Richard's namesake, Emma had adored. Her brother, who thought only of his self-advancement and little else, she did not.*

*Her long fingers, with their bitten, uneven nails, rested with a slight tremble on Richard's left hand. Unlike her, he appeared calm and unperturbed as they*

*ascended the flight of stone steps leading up to the great open-swing doors of the Cathedral of Canterbury. But why would Richard not be at ease? It was not he, after all, who was to wed with a stranger and be crowned as England's Queen.*

*With unbound, unveiled fair hair and her large shining eyes, Emma was passably pretty, but she was aware that Æthelred, surveying her from the top of the steps was assessing that her legs were too long, her nose too large, her chin too pointed. Her breasts and hips not full and rounded. . . .*

*. . . The drizzling rain had eased as the Norman entourage had ridden through Canterbury's gates, the swaths of mist, hanging across the Kent countryside like ill-fitted curtaining, not deterring the common folk from running out of their hovels to inspect her. England and the English might not hold much liking for the Normans and their sea-roving Viking cousins, but still they had laughed and applauded as she rode by; had strewn blossom and spring-green, new-budded branches in her path. They wanted peace, an end to the incessant i-viking raiding and pirating, to the killing and bloodshed. . . .*

*. . . If Emma minded being so blatantly used for political gain, it was of no consequence to anyone. Except to Emma herself.*

*Æthelred was stepping forward, reaching out to take her hand, a smile on his face, crow's-foot lines wrinkling at his eyes. She took in his sun-weathered, leathery face and fair curling hair that tumbled to his shoulders, a moustache trailing down each side of his mouth to run into a beard with flecks of grey hair grizzling through it. She sank into a deep reverence, bending her head to hide the heat of crimson that was suddenly flushing into her cheeks. At her side, Richard snorted, disgruntled that she should be greeted before himself. He had not wanted to escort her to England, had vociferously balked at meeting face to face with this English King.*

*"I would not trust a man involved in the murder of his own brother to gain the wearing of a crown any further than I could spew him," . . . If they were his thoughts about this King, then why, in the name of sweet Jesu, had he arranged for Emma to wed him? Why was she here, feeling awkward and uncertain, fearing to look up at the man who would soon be*



bedding her and taking her innocence of maidenhood? . . .

. . . What if *Æthelred* was ugly? What if his breath and body stank worse than a six-month uncleaned pig-pen? What if he does not like me? The questions had tumbled round and around in Emma's mind these three months since being told of the arrangement; had haunted her by night and day. She knew she had to be wed, Richard had been insistent on good marriages for all his sisters and it was a woman's duty to be a wife, to bear sons for her lord. Either that or drown in the monotonous daily misery of the nunnery! There would be no abbess's veil for Richard's sisters, though, he needed the alliances, the silver and the land. . . Richard wanted all he could get, and he wanted it not tomorrow or next year, but now. One by one his sisters had been paired to noble marriages, but they were all so much older than Emma. She had not expected to be bargained away so soon.

From somewhere she had to gather the courage and dignity to look up, to smile at *Æthelred* . . . she clung to the talisman of her mother's last parting words as if they were a cask of holy relics: "No matter how ill, how frightened, or how angry you might be, child, censure your feelings. Smile. Hold your chin high, show only pride, nothing else. Fear and tears are to be kept private. You are to be crowned and anointed as Queen of England. The wife and mother of kings. Remember that."

She took a breath, swallowed. Looked up at the man standing before her. Looked at *Æthelred* who was to be her husband, and knew, instantly, that she disliked him.

**T**hus begins *A Hollow Crown*, published in the UK in 2004. Helen Hollick, the author, felt "[i]t never received that 'final polish' that it deserved. Sadly, Heinemann (and my ex-agent) had lost interest in me, and I think at the time, historical

fiction was a waning genre. No one told me they didn't want an epic tome – as was the fashion for historical about 8-10 years ago. I was not experienced enough when writing *Crown* to know the techniques of writing . . . so I made some enormous technical blunders. Point of View 'head hopping' for one."

Perhaps other authors can empathize; when I wrote *The Scottish Thistle*, my writing method lacked the experience that comes with writing and polishing over time. Once we acquire this skill, we might wish we could go back and improve the manuscript, but few authors get to do so. Not Helen. Sourcebooks offered to publish her manuscript here in the States. She agreed, but found one stipulation a bit daunting – cut 45,000 words from the manuscript.

First reaction? Horror. Then panic, then a little hostile, and then utter cowardice!

My ex-agent dropped me several years ago and no replacement has wanted to take me on, so at times . . . I feel very alone and vulnerable – not having anyone to bang the drum or stand up for you is difficult at times. There is, also, no one to plea "help!" to.

I am fortunate to have author Elizabeth Chadwick as a dear friend, though. She is so practical and down to earth (not at all the dizzy air-head blonde that I am!) and she tells the truth. That might be hard to take at times – but when she says something is good, you know it truly is, she's not just being "nice."

(My motto? If you don't want to hear an honest opinion – don't ask for one!)

I e-mailed her, something along the lines of "Eek! What do I do!!!!????"

As always her wise advice set

me on a calmer path. "Take this as a fantastic opportunity to turn what is a good book into the great book it deserves to be."

My editor at Sourcebooks [also] . . . cut unnecessary words, tighten[ed] it up; mark[ed] up scenes / paragraphs / words that were repeated or rambled.

Some of the scenes she suggested we could cut horrified me! "I know we've already had a battle scene," I said in one e-mail, "but we cannot cut out the Battle of Ashington – it's very important. Cnut wins his crown because of his victory. I'll cut the other battle" (at Thetford – I now just mention it, not write it in detail.)

She also wanted me to entirely cut the scenes building up to and including where Emma climbs the cliffs.

"I'll pare the wording down," I said, "but that scene stays!"

I get more e-mails about that scene than anything else, and besides, that was one of the reasons why I wanted to write the book in the first place – to use that real event.<sup>1</sup> It stayed.





*It's amazing how easy it is to cut once you get going; do I really need 'it was a gloriously beautiful day?' When glorious or beautiful could quite easily go (and probably should not have been there in the first place!)*

*The thing to watch, is keeping the continuity going – cut a thread, yes, but make sure it still leads somewhere and is not left dangling in the wind.*

*By the time I reached the second half I had gained the confidence to cut entire chapters. Did we need yet another political murder when a brief paragraph would do?*

*That's the thing about having confidence in yourself and your editor. OK so it might have taken hours, maybe days, to write that scene. Come the final edit, if it doesn't fit, if it doesn't really serve a purpose – why is it there?*

*Pressing that delete button can be the hardest thing a writer does, but more often than not, the wisest.*

**S**ome changes Helen made are minute – ones readers may not notice – but combined with the major revisions, the opening chapter of *The Forever Queen* provides readers with a better glimpse into Emma as a young girl, probably around thirteen years old, on the day she first sees her much older husband-to-be, Æthelred. She is insecure, with a poor self image – much like young girls are today, which allows female readers to quickly identify with Emma. Helen's goal here is intentional. The story spans forty-one years, and she wanted "to show Emma growing in maturity and confidence – changing from a shy, rather frightened, lonely girl into the woman who would do *anything* to retain her crown."

*Emma was uncertain whether it was a growing need to visit the privy or the remaining queasiness of mal de mer, seasickness, that was making her feel*

*so utterly dreadful. Or was it the man assessing her with narrowed eyes from where he stood at the top of the steps? A man she had never seen until this moment, who was four and thirty years to her three and ten, spoke a language she barely understood, and who, from the morrow, was to be her wedded husband.*

*Did he approve of what he saw? Her sun-gold hair, blue eyes, and fair skin? Maybe, but . . . he was more probably thinking her nose was too large, her chin too pointed, and her bosoms not yet firm and rounded. . . .*

*. . . Hiding her discomfort as well as she could, she stared at this King's sun-weathered face. His blond hair, curling to his shoulders, had silver streaks running through it. His moustache trailed down each side of his mouth into a beard flecked with grey hair. He looked so old! Her long fingers, with their bitten, uneven nails, rested with a slight tremble on her brother's left hand. Unlike her, Richard appeared unperturbed as they ascended the steps leading up to the great open-swung doors of Canterbury Cathedral. But why would he not be at ease? It was not he, after all, who was to wed a stranger and be crowned as England's anointed Queen. . . .*

*. . . The drizzling rain had eased as their Norman entourage had ridden through Canterbury's gates; the mist, hanging like ill-fitted curtaining across the Kent countryside had not deterred the common folk from running out of their hovels to inspect her. England and the English might not hold much liking for the Normans and their sea-roving Viking cousins, but still they had laughed and applauded as she passed by. They wanted peace, an end to the incessant i-viking raiding and pirating, to the killing and bloodshed. . . .*

*If Emma minded being so blatantly used for political gain, it was of no consequence to anyone. Except to Emma herself. What if I am not a pleasing wife? What if he does not like me? The questions had*

*tumbled round and around in Emma's mind these three months since being told of the arrangement, had haunted her by night and day. She knew she had to wed; it was a woman's duty to be a wife, to bear sons. Either that or drown in the monotonous daily misery of the nunnery, but there would be no Abbess's veil for her. . . . Richard wanted all he could get, and he wanted it not tomorrow or the next year, but now. One by one his sisters had been paired to noble marriages, but they were all so much older than Emma. She had not expected to be bargained away so soon.*

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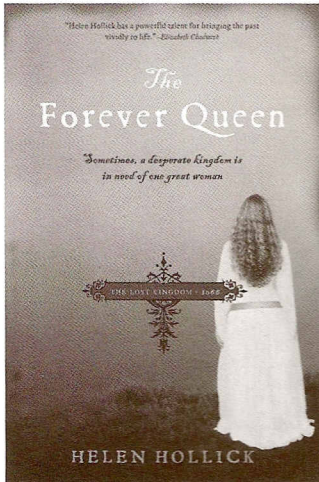
*He had not wanted to escort her to England. . . . "I do not trust a man involved in the murder of his own brother to gain the wearing of a crown," . . .*

*If these were his thoughts, then why, in the name of sweet Jesu, had he agreed to this marriage? Why was she here, feeling awkward and uncertain, fearing to look at the man who would soon be taking her innocence of maidenhood? . . .*

*. . . From somewhere Emma had to gather the courage and dignity to raise her head, smile at Æthelred . . . She clung to the talisman of her mother's parting words: "No matter how ill, how frightened, or how angry you might be, child, censure your feelings. Smile. Hold your chin high, show only pride, nothing else. Fear and tears are to be kept private. You are to be crowned and anointed Queen of England. The wife and mother of Kings. Remember that."*

*Emma took a breath, looked at the man who was to be her husband, and knew, instantly, that she disliked him.*





Through deleting, revising, and reordering her words, Helen shows Emma “as a young girl bewildered, lonely and frightened.” As the story progresses, though, she “realises her inner strength,” which permits her to do whatever she must to survive.

One word Helen chose to retain is “moustache.” A reader sees this word, processes and understands it immediately, then continues reading without interrupting the flow of the story. A good historical novelist strives to produce a story that is as authentic as possible, but here Helen deviated from this “rule.” The language of Emma’s time period was Latin or Old English, but few of us are conversant in these tongues. “Moustache” doesn’t derive from either of those languages; nor does it enter English until several centuries later. Rather than break the story’s flow with “trail of hair beneath his nose running down each side of the mouth,” which comes across as “clumsy and contrived,” Helen opted for a word that immediately creates an image we understand.

Was this scene how Helen opened Emma’s story in her first draft? No. Initially Emma rode “to Canterbury from Dover. I figured, in the second or third re-write, that the impact of this young, somewhat nervous girl walking up those steps and look[ing] for the very

first time into the older, indifferent face of the man who was to be her husband, had far greater impact, so I ditched the original opening.” She’s right!

When I interview an author for this column, I always ask what else he/she would like to share. Helen says:

*I think of Emma as an equal to Eleanor of Aquitaine – they are two very similar women . . . but almost everyone interested in history has heard of Eleanor – very few people know who Emma was. I wrote the novel to bring her to readers’ attention. . . .*

*There are violent scenes; rape, murder, battle – but these were violent times. It is no good writing a historical novel that tries to re-create a flavor of that past – and then censor the nasty bits.*

*For myself, until Forever Queen was published by Sourcebooks . . . I did not have much pride in the book.*

*. . . Heinemann and my ex-agent had lost interest in me and my work (I went through four editors at Heinemann in a couple of years – one I never even met). That can so undermine an author’s confidence – it certainly did mine! When A Hollow Crown was released, Heinemann did no marketing . . . To know those supposedly supporting me had no faith in the book, or me, was devastating.*

*Plus, just as I was about to start writing it . . . my closest friend died suddenly. . . . It is so hard to write when your heart and soul is grieving.*

*However, Sourcebooks gave the book – and me – a new lease of life. My US editor, Shana Drehs, has been so supportive and enthusiastic. I can’t thank her – or the managing director, Dominique Raccah, and all the production team – enough.*

When I read historical novels, I often pick up stories set in modern times, but a *Publisher’s Weekly* reviewer wrote of *The Forever Queen*: “Hollick does

a remarkable job of bringing to life a little known but powerful queen, as well as the milieu and world she inhabited. The scope is vast and the cast is huge, but Hollick remains firmly in control, giving readers an absorbing plot that never lags over the course of a fat, satisfying book.”<sup>2</sup> I concur. Not once did Helen’s 628-page tale break the spell she wove as she transported me back to medieval England.<sup>3</sup>

#### Notes:

1. Of this scene, Helen writes: “Before I even started writing I knew I wanted to use the scene where she climbs the cliffs when the tide cuts her off. It is a factual scene from several centuries later – 1918/19 to be exact! My own grandmother – also called Emma – found herself in exactly that situation and climbed the cliffs in full Edwardian dress and holding my father in her teeth. I wanted to honour her heroism. Queen Emma was the right character to make use of it.

2. This review appeared in the 6 September 2010 issue on page 23.

3. If you would like visit Helen, you can learn more about her and her writing at Helen Hollick’s World of Books (<http://www.helenhollick.net/>) or Helen Hollick ~ Historical Fiction & Historical Adventure (<http://www.acorne.blogspot.com/>). You’ll also find her on Facebook and Twitter. The video trailer for *The Forever Queen* is online at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=o5JXoCsf\\_4k](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o5JXoCsf_4k). Emma’s story continues in *I Am the Chosen King* (US edition) or *Harold the King* (UK edition).

*A special note to authors: If you have a published or soon-to-be-published historical novel you’d like to see spotlighted in “The Red Pencil,” please contact me at cindy@cindyvallar.com and I’ll send you the particulars. Keep in mind you must have an early draft of your manuscript available. Cindy Vallar is a freelance editor, an associate editor for Solander, and the author of The Scottish Thistle ([www.cindyvallar.com/scottishthistle.html](http://www.cindyvallar.com/scottishthistle.html)). A retired librarian, she also writes about pirates, presents workshops, and reviews books.*