



# RED PENCIL

## In her final Red Pencil column, Cindy Vallar examines the collaboration between author and editor in Tamera Alexander's *Christmas at Carnton*.

When Tamera Alexander first began working with editors, the collaboration was a challenge. “[N]o one enjoys having all their mistakes or weaknesses pointed out.” Now, she eagerly awaits her editor’s comments “[b]ecause I know [her] suggestions and catches are going to make my story so much better than it would have been on my own.”

*Christmas at Carnton*, the novella that launches Alexander’s new trilogy, *The Carnton Novels*, takes place in Franklin, Tennessee, at a historic plantation at the end of 1863. Jake Winston, a captain in the Confederate Army, and Aletta Prescott, a pregnant widow with a young son, are at “crucial turning points in their lives.”<sup>1</sup> Thomas Nelson, her publisher, hired freelance editor Ami McConnell to work with Tamera. Ami spent more than two decades, she says, “acquiring and editing books, most recently as Editor-in-Chief at Howard Books / Simon & Schuster,” before opening her own business. When Ami approaches an edit and the world the author has conjured, she “tread[s] carefully, poised for any possible bump or diversion. If I detect a word, image, or phrase that might make a reader slow down or (God-forbid) leave the created story-world, I flag it for the author. Ultimately we want readers to be completely spellbound — to be so moved by the book that the ‘real’ world falls away.” Why does an author need an editor? “Novelists take incredible pains to get storytelling right, but it’s impossible to have true objectivity when you’re in that deep.”

Although writing the draft of a manuscript “is almost always torture for me, with very few moments of epiphany and joy,” Tamera eagerly awaits the substantive edit. When it arrives four to nine weeks after submission, “[I]t’s party time!” She gets “to really dig [in] and add [the] depth of emotion and nuance of character and setting” that were initially missing.

After reading the first three chapters, Ami wrote, “Are we getting to [it] quickly enough? I know you’re not a Meet Cute kind of writer, but I feel like we’re not meeting Jake quickly enough. Consider a scene from Jake sooner?” In reading the opening chapters “with a fresh eye,” Tamera agreed. Those scenes were “too focused on Aletta,” so she inserted a scene into chapter two. This “helps set the tone for his struggle and conflict through the story,” as well as giving the beginning “a much more balanced perspective.”

*“Hold still for me, Captain Winston.”*

*The steel scalpel cold against his temple, Jake obliged as the doctor cut the bandages from around his eyes. “I take it you’ve done this before, Doc.”*

*The army surgeon laughed beneath his breath. “Nope. You’re the first.”*

*Hearing the teasing in the older man’s voice, Jake smiled to mask the tightness in his chest, trying his best not to let his thoughts go where the deliberately imposed darkness of the past seven days had threatened to take them.*

*“I consulted with another surgeon, Captain, who agreed with my diagnosis. Allowing your eyes to rest for the past few days, especially with that salve on them, should have advanced the healing process. Once I remove the*

*bandages, I want you to keep your eyes closed.”*

*With the cloths removed, the coolness of the air intensified around Jake’s eyes. Even with them still shut, he sensed the brightness inside the hospital tent, which wasn’t a surprise. He wasn’t blind, after all. The whack on his head he’d suffered after being shot had simply blurred his vision a little.*

*“I’m handing you a warm compress, Captain . . .”*

*Jake opened his hands.*

*“Press it gently to your eyes. It will help dissolve whatever salve remains.”*

*Jake complied, the warmth and moisture feeling good. He rubbed carefully, the ointment’s once-pungent scent, smelling a little like bitterroot and rosemary, all but gone.*

*“Now, still holding the cloth up to your eyes, I want you to open them a little at a time. Let your eyes adjust to the light.”*

*Jake squinted, then winced. Even the dimness of the tent seemed overbright. Finally, after a moment or so, he managed to open his eyes fully. He blinked as his immediate world came into view.*

*“How do things look, Captain Winston?”*

*Jake held his hand out in front of him. “So far, so good, Doc.”*

*The physician handed him a book. “Try reading for me.”*

*Jake opened the cover and flipped over a few pages — and felt that unwelcome tug on his thoughts returning again. He squinted. “I can read the words. But they’re a mite fuzzy.”*

*“That could be due to some lingering salve.”*

*Jake nodded, but he didn’t think so. He’d wiped the ointment clean.*

*“Try your rifle sight next.”*

*The doctor crossed to the entry of the tent and pulled back the flap. The cold followed quickly on the heels of a dull sun as Jake pulled the sight from his pocket and peered through. His pulse edged up a notch. He closed his right eye, then opened it again, trying to focus. But couldn’t. He swallowed hard.*

*“Don’t be discouraged, Captain. Similar to the wound in your shoulder, your eyesight needs time to heal. At this point, we still have every reason to believe your full sight will return.”*

*Again Jake nodded. But the apprehension in the surgeon’s expression, and how the man looked away when he spoke, told him a different story.*

*A story no sharpshooter ever wanted to hear.*

*Ami also questioned Aletta’s action in another scene. “Pregnant chopping wood and actually building nativity — at six to seven months pregnant . . . [C]an she be doing something else? Or doing smaller wood work?”*

*Discovering how little wood was left in the bin, she retrieved the axe, situated a log atop the old oak stump and brought the axe down with practiced force. She chopped wood until the bin was stocked for several more days then, breath coming heavy, carried an armful into the house. The crackle of dry wood succumbing to flame filled the bedroom, and the warmth felt good on her skin.*

Tamera understood Ami's perspective, but "felt strongly about not toning down Aletta's physical struggle . . . I wanted to stay true to the challenges that women of that time period endured when all the males in the family were off fighting the war and there was no one else who could step in and do all the 'man's work.'" To address this concern, Tamera elevated Aletta's pain and anxiety and highlighted her unconventional skill – "a catalyst for conflict between her and Jake. This is just one of the things I love about rewrites – the way the layers of the plot and the characters become woven more fully into the fabric of the story."

*Discovering how little wood was left in the bin, she retrieved the ax, situated a log atop the old oak stump, and brought the ax down with practiced force – something she wouldn't be able to do much longer. The log split clean down the middle. Since her parents had never had a son, she'd been forced to learn unusual skills for a woman. Skills that had proven helpful over the past two years since Warren had left. Not to say she hadn't missed Warren. She had, terribly. But she hadn't been quite so lost in certain ways as some of her friends had been.*

*She chopped wood until the bin was stocked for several more days, then, breath coming heavy, carried an armful into the house. The crackle of dry wood succumbing to flame filled the bedroom, and the warmth felt good on her skin.*

Tamera hopes her readers will "fall in love with the characters," but Ami had the opposite reaction in this scene with Jake and his commanding officer.<sup>2</sup>

*Stratton reached for the newspaper buried beneath the piles on his desk and pushed it toward him. "Fellow wrote in and lambasted the editor for suggesting that some women were actually fighting, even now, alongside the men. As if we wouldn't be able to tell the difference."*

*Jake unfolded the paper, found the editorial page, and stared.*

*"Next thing you know, Captain, they'll be saying we ought to allow women to hold command." Stratton laughed. "Can you imagine?"*

*Jake finally looked up and managed a smile. "Mind if I keep this, sir?"*

*Stratton shook his head. "So while I agree with you most wholeheartedly in your opinion, Captain . . . There is still the matter of General Bragg's request."*

*His mind still on the editorial letter, Jake nodded . . .*

*He glanced at the newspaper again before slipping it into the haversack as well, still not believing the journalist had published his letter.*

*It was something, seeing his own words in print. In an actual newspaper. All this time sitting around waiting to mend, putting those compresses and poultices on his eyes, was convoluting his mind. He'd penned the letter late one night after reading the editor's statement about females and war, and about how women ought to be allowed to take part. Absurd. But as it turned out, the writing had proven to be cathartic. Much like his sketching.*

Ami wrote: "grrr . . . Best for him to have actually written it? As it is, he could merely agree with it . . . Maybe a sketch from him accompanies a letter to the editor written by someone else? I know you're setting Aletta and Jake up for reconciliation, but his stance makes me dislike him . . . and I've just met him."

Initially reluctant to change this, Tamera "looked at Jake from a reader's perspective – a person who doesn't already know and love Jake like I do –" and discovered she agreed.

*Jake didn't share his humor. "Wouldn't it be easier, sir, just to tell the women to donate their money and valuables and be done with it? Would save us all a lot of time. After all, the gentler sex has no place in matters of war, sir. They're best shielded from war's cruelties. Better for them to stick to hearth and home."*

*Stratton smiled. "You sound like that letter to the editor I read yesterday."*

*"Sir?"*

*Stratton reached for the newspaper buried beneath the piles on his desk and pushed it toward him. "Fellow wrote in and lambasted the editor for suggesting that some women were actually fighting, even now, alongside the men. As if we wouldn't be able to tell the difference."*

*Jake unfolded the paper, found the editorial page, and scanned the letter.*

*"Next thing you know, Captain, they'll be saying we ought to allow women to hold command." Stratton laughed. "Can you imagine?"*

*Jake finally looked up and managed a smile. The wording in the letter was overly harsh, but he couldn't say he disagreed with the opinion overall. The way he looked at it, it wasn't so much that women lacked the constitution for war as much as that men had a God-bestowed duty to protect them from the horrors of it. He laid the paper aside.*

Tamera advises new authors to embrace the editing process. "I believe my books are *far* better because of the collaboration with my editors . . . than if I'd attempted to write the book without the benefit of their shared experience." Ami helped her "to see the individual trees in the massive forest [I] planted (in which [I] often lose [my] way)."

**You can learn more about Tamera and Ami at their websites, [tameraalexander.com/](http://tameraalexander.com/) and <https://amimccconnell.com>, respectively.**

## REFERENCES

### 1. Tamera Alexander

Borrowed from "A Personal Note" that appears on the About Tamera page of her website, <http://tameraalexander.com/about>

### 2. Ibid.



## WRITTEN BY CINDY VALLAR

A freelance editor and novelist, Cindy Vallar hopes you have enjoyed her column, which has been an HNS mainstay since 2005. You can visit her at [www.cindyvallar.com](http://www.cindyvallar.com).