



THE RED PENCIL

Cindy Vallar analyzes the work behind published manuscripts. In this issue, she examines how David Gaughran fleshes out scenes in *Liberty Boy* (CreateSpace, 2016).

Stories do not miraculously appear. They begin as ideas, which are then written down; even then they are incomplete. Only through multiple revisions do the story and characters evolve into a novel that captures our attention and transports us back in time. *Liberty Boy* is set in Ireland in the aftermath of the 1803 Rising – an event that fascinates David Gaughran, he says, because “it’s the last real time that Catholics and Protestants came together for Irish independence. The course of Irish history would have been very different had it been successful. After the catastrophic failure of 1803, the independence movement became more sectarian, more ruthless, and focused on guerrilla attacks and sabotage and infiltration, rather than engaging the British in open warfare. I was also interested in how the figure of Robert Emmet had been mythologized since, and how disagreements still rage today over what happened in 1803. An intriguing thought popped into my head: if we have difficulty making sense of what happened now, how hard must it have been for people on the streets back then? All sorts of scenes then started unfolding.”

The main character in *Liberty Boy* is Jimmy O’Flaherty, whose father never returned from the 1798 rebellion. He meets Kitty Doyle, a rebel tasked with “getting close to Jimmy as her superiors suspect he may be a British informant,” at a hanging outside a church. They travel from Dublin to Vinegar Hill to find his father’s grave. “It’s a pivotal scene [because] Jimmy and Kitty seem to be progressing towards some kind of romantic encounter . . . but Jimmy makes a balls of it.” It unfolds from Kitty’s perspective so David can “organically feed some historical context to the reader.” It also allows him “to contrast Kitty’s view of recent history with Jimmy’s – sowing the seeds for what will eventually cause them to be tragically separated.”

Kitty could feel Jimmy’s eyes tracking her as

she wandered about, trying to get her bearings.

“Are you sure you know where it is?” She looked down onto Enniscorthy below, desperately trying to remember. “Don’t tell me we came all this way –”

“Shush and let me think.” She walked up to the crest of the hill, without waiting to see if he was following, and looked downwards. The mound her uncle had previously pointed out to her was immediately obvious. Jimmy came to her side and saw what she was looking at. He then fell to his knees, clutching the sad bunch of flowers he had picked on the way up. He flung them to the ground for there was no need to place them. The whole mound was covered with bright red flowers.

Blood is the best fertilizer, Kitty thought, watching Jimmy’s face contort with pain. She sat down beside him, brushing her skirt. He began to cry and she put her arm around him, hesitantly at first before pulling him into an embrace. She could feel his tears on her neck as his body convulsed with sobs, while he let out all the pain he’d carried with him for so long.

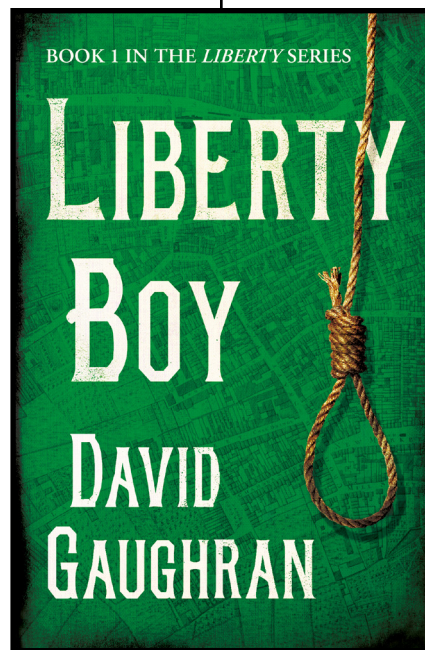
Kitty knew exactly what he was feeling. She almost felt like sharing her own pain, but something stopped her. She pulled back to look at him.

His eyes were puffy from the tears; he wiped his face with the back of his sleeve. “Sorry,” he said.

“Don’t –”

He kissed her. She almost resisted and then let herself go. She lay back on the long grass, taking him with her. He moved on top of her and kissed her more deeply, his hands on her face one moment and nervously approaching her breasts the next. She parted her legs a little and drew him even closer.

He pulled away. “I can’t,” he said, and sat up panting, staring down at the flower-covered mound. Kitty’s face burned bright red. She turned away, and then got up and walked down towards the horses, leaving him to stew in whatever bitter juices were flowing through his veins instead of



blood.

David's initial drafts are "threadbare" and meant to record the scene "before [the idea] vanishes." One problem in this version is that Kitty "comes across as an empty cipher." She believes strongly in a free Ireland, but Jimmy wants nothing to do with ridding the country of its British invaders. The one commonality between them is that they are both from the Liberties section of Dublin. "Irish history is extremely contentious and I wanted to represent a range of views in the book, and show how events might have been interpreted contemporaneously by those experiencing them on the street, rather than how a historian might assess matters from a distance. By adding a little more description and atmosphere, all viewed from the eyes of Kitty, I was able to reveal a little more of her character. It also allowed me to foreshadow the secret she will reveal later on."

A secondary, but equally important, goal is to take advantage of the tension building between Kitty and Jimmy. The draft fails to do this, so David has Jimmy "muck up the encounter . . . so that any consummation of their budding attraction could wait until later in the narrative. I wanted the readers screaming at them to get together by the time it finally happened – something I shamelessly stole from romance novels."

David prefers to view the world through a wide lens, a standpoint that affects his writing. "There are wonderful tropes from other genres which you can incorporate in your work to give it more resonance. These are tropes for a reason. I saw a very clever talk by a writer called Jeremy Sheldon who explained how *Lethal Weapon* incorporated many elements from rom-coms to give the relationship between Mel Gibson and Danny Glover more emotional power That stuck in my mind and I was keen to deploy some of these devices to beef up the romantic thread that runs through the novel, as that had to be strong enough to carry across a series."

Revising takes time and is rarely easy, but when done well, it adds depth to the characters, the scene, and the story. It removes what bogs down the plot and inserts details and emotions that make us care about what happens.

Kitty could feel Jimmy's eyes tracking her as she wandered about, trying to get her bearings. She looked down onto Enniscorthy below, desperately trying to remember. Tendrils of smoke reached lazily towards the sky. A pair of fishing boats bobbed on a river swollen with rainfall. Maybe that's why God is so blind to our suffering, she thought. From this distance, the town looked so

peaceful. There was no indication of how many had died on that bridge; the blood had long been washed from the cobbles. No monuments stood to remember the dead either, nor was there any other outward sign of the havoc that had been wreaked. Down on the streets, you could see it – in people's eyes, in their shifting gait, their haunted expressions. Not from up here.

She shook her head, not wanting to remember what she was trying to forget.

"You sure you know where it is?" Jimmy asked. "Don't tell me we came all this –"

"Shush and let me think." After a couple of moments, she turned back to him. "They call it The Battle of Vinegar Hill, but it wasn't much of one. The English general brought in four columns of troops – twenty thousand, all told – and tried to trap the Unitedmen on Vinegar Hill. They began shelling immediately. Only the late arrival of one of the columns gave the rebels any chance to run for it. Needham's Gap, they called it, named for the commander whose lateness prevented an even worse slaughter."

Kitty turned westward, toward Enniscorthy. "Those who did escape struck out for the woods east of the River Slaney, eventually making it to Wicklow." Her eyes followed the curve of the river as it encircled the hill to the north. She stepped northwards toward the edge of the bluff. "Which means it should be down here."

She strode up to the crest of the hill, not waiting to see if he was following, and peered downwards. The mound her uncle had previously shown her was immediately obvious. Jimmy came to her side and saw what she was staring at. He fell to his knees, clutching the sad bunch of wildflowers he had picked on the way up. Then he flung them to the ground. There was no need to place them; the mound was covered with vivid blooms.

Blood is the best fertilizer, Kitty thought, watching Jimmy's face contort with pain. She sat down beside him, brushing off her skirt. When he began to cry, gently at first, and then louder, she put her arm around him, hesitantly pulling him into an embrace. His tears were warm on her neck, his body convulsing with sobs, as all the pain he'd carried with him for so long found a voice.

Kitty knew exactly what he was feeling. She almost felt like sharing her own anguish, but something stopped her. She pulled back to look at him. Eyes puffy with tears, he wiped his nose on back of his sleeve. "Sorry," he muttered.

"Don't –"

Then he kissed her.

Kitty almost resisted, but then she fell back on the long grass, taking him with her. He moved on top of her, his kiss deepening, his hands on her face one moment and nervously cupping her breasts the next. She parted her legs, drawing him even closer.

"I can't." Jimmy pulled away and sat up, panting. He stared down at the flower-covered mound; his wet eyes almost as red as Kitty's crimson face. She turned away, biting back an acerbic response. With a deep breath, she rose to her feet. Jimmy didn't even try to stop her. Keeping her emotions in check, she set off down the hill, leaving him to stew in whatever bitter juices flowed through his veins instead of blood.

An evident change is the additional description in the opening paragraph. "I used to write very neutral descriptions, but with this book I wanted to make sure characters had an opinion about what they were seeing and that was conveyed to the reader. If everything should be driving the narrative forward, then description is no different. . . . [A]side from getting to know Kitty a little better, and showing her alternative perspective on historical events, the description here gives the reader a chance to breathe somewhat – a necessary pause before what happens next. It was all too abrupt in the first draft. As for God, the thought struck me that people living in Dublin in 1803 probably didn't have too many opportunities to see the world from above. You know the first time you climb a tall building and look down? Even if you aren't religious, you can't help thinking of God. This was a chance to show that Kitty is angry at the world, that she feels there is no justice, and it's also foreshadowing something . . . about her past . . ."

David also inserts historical background, but doing this effectively requires practice because it needs to be accomplished with subtlety. "You can get away with a paragraph or two, but any more than that can feel like a history lesson, and that's not what readers want. You can weave it through the narrative in various ways and doing so in dialogue is especially good as it also gives you an opportunity to reveal character at the same time."

Two other minimal changes concern repetition and sensory detail. "Flowers" occurs twice in the draft and referring to them as a "sad bunch" reminded him of "flowers someone buys in a . . . gas station, which have wilted from car fumes, rather than something plucked on a mountain trail in 1803." As for his use of the senses, David's first drafts rely almost exclusively on sight. "[I]n successive drafts I always have to remind myself to add sounds and smells and tastes. And touch, of course, especially when two people are being intimate."

Liberty Boy is the first installment in the Liberty series, and a change of pace from his earlier works which take place in Latin America. "I had never wanted to write anything set in Ireland. It's my home country and didn't have the exotic appeal, to me, of a faraway place. Anyway, I eventually solved the problem by realizing I could have a hero begin his journey in a more commercial setting, before whisking him away to parts unknown, and the idea for the series was born. It turns out that I know nothing: I ended up loving writing about Ireland and can't wait to do it again."

Nor can I. David's captivating novel vividly recreates the past and when his characters speak, it's as if you are nearby listening to their words. He hopes to release the next title in the series, *Diemen's Land*, in Fall 2017.

If you'd like to know more about David and his writing, visit his website, davidgaughran.com. He can also be found on Facebook and Twitter. ❁



A freelance editor and historical novelist, CINDY VALLAR also presents writers' workshops and writes nonfiction articles about maritime piracy and historical fiction. Her historical fantasy "Rumble the Dragon" appears in Dark Oak Press' anthology *A Tall Ship, a Star, and Plunder*. You can visit her at www.cindyvallar.com.