



## THE RED PENCIL

Cindy Vallar analyzes the work behind published manuscripts. In this issue, she profiles Elizabeth Camden's *Beyond All Dreams*.

*Don't tell me the moon is shining;  
show me the glint of the light on broken glass.*  
— Anton Chekhov

These words encapsulate a goal familiar to all novelists: *Show, don't tell*. Showing draws readers into the story so they experience the events firsthand. Telling keeps readers at arm's length from what's occurring. Think of it as the difference between watching a football game on the television versus actually snatching the ball from an opponent and his teammates pursuing you down the field. Which option puts you in the center of the action?

Elizabeth Camden, author of *Beyond All Dreams*, defines the difference this way: "Showing involves actions from the characters, while telling usually involves the author inserting information into the text (sometimes delivered through dialog, but still essentially an information dump)." That's not to say that an author should never tell. "Telling is perfectly fine if it is merely sprinkled in. It helps move the manuscript along, especially if you've got a lot of information that must be conveyed quickly.

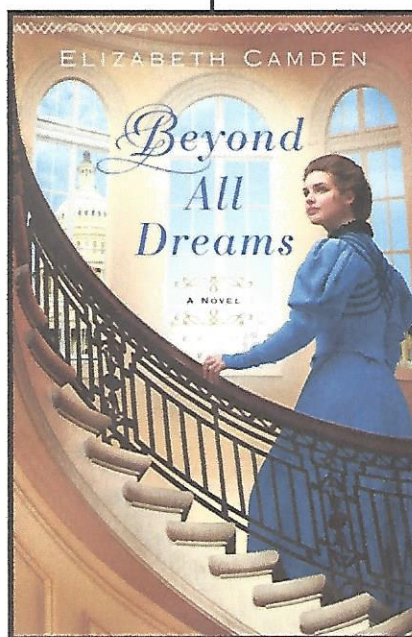
"However, character development is almost always more successful when shown rather than told. Great characterization is what sells a book and keeps readers coming back for more. . . I can *tell* you my heroine is smart, but if I show a scene where she uses verbal swordplay to elegantly cut a rival down to size, it is much more interesting and believable to the reader."

Since it's harder to show a scene, many authors initially tell their story. "During my first draft I write as fast as possible," Elizabeth explains. "First drafts are challenging . . . so my goal is to get to the finish line as quickly as possible." Only then does she revise the scene to show. "It is a challenge to find original and meaningful ways to show a character, but the rewards are tremendous. Telling is fast and easy. Sometimes writers who believe one must *never* tell end up with pages of tedious action that really doesn't enrich the story, it just links more important events. So once or twice in every novel I usually insert an

'overview' passage that summarizes a couple of months passing and what happened to the characters. It helps keep the pace brisk."

In *Beyond All Dreams*, Anna O'Brien is a librarian at the Library of Congress. A recent addition to the map collection reveals an error in the official version of what happened to her father. After her requests to reopen the navy's investigation fall on deaf ears and elicit threats, she enlists the help of a handsome, yet arrogant, congressman. Their search for answers endangers Anna as well as the United States. Below is a segment from the early draft of this novel.

*Anna O'Brien always had a problem with being too nice.*



*She was nice to her aunt and uncle, even when they treated her like hired help. When the grocer tried to charge her for a dozen apples when she'd only bought ten, she smiled and assured him it was an honest mistake. When people growled and snapped at her, she averted her eyes and refused to rise to the bait.*

*Which was what had been happening for the past ten minutes. Her day began like any other. The first thing in the morning she reported to her position at the Library of Congress on the third floor of the U.S. Capitol. She had been performing research for a senator from Ohio . . . when she'd been abruptly summoned to report downstairs to the Naval*

*Affairs room.*

*She was stunned to learn she had been called downstairs to be reprimanded for daring to question the validity of an old naval investigative report.*

*A steely-eyed, bull-necked Lieutenant Gerald Rowling greeted her with a scowl. This morning Anna sent a message to the War Department to notify them of new information that cast doubt on their conclusions about the sinking of the U.S.S. Culpeper. She never expected such a speedy response, or one so virulent. Two hours after sending her request, a snarling Lieutenant Rowling arrived and ordered her out of the library to accuse her of meddling where she had no business.*

*She gathered a breath and spoke in a measured*

tone.

*"Anytime fifty-six men disappear in the middle of the ocean, it is bound to raise questions," she said quietly. Her voice echoed in the cavernous meeting room, with its vaulted ceilings and ornate tiled floors. Like most of the rooms in the U.S. Capitol, these rooms were designed to impress, although Anna suspected she'd been called into this room to intimidate her. She felt like a little brown sparrow sitting in the gilded splendor of the Navy's most lavish chamber.*

*"Those questions were resolved nineteen years ago," Lieutenant Rowling snapped from his position sitting behind the glossy mahogany desk. Anna fidgeted on the Turkish carpet before him, her skin blistering under the contempt in his voice. "An investigation was conducted," Rowling continued. "Reports filed. The U.S.S. Culpeper sank during a late season hurricane, all hands lost. Case closed."*

*Anna was well aware of the details of the sinking of the Culpeper. After all, her father had been one of the men who disappeared on that ship.*

*"That's the problem," Anna pointed out in her most appealing tone. "I am certain the report contains an error, and I'd like the case re-opened so it can be corrected."*

*"The report was finalized nineteen years ago," Rowling said. "Copies were sent to all the deceased sailors' families, and they were given a three month period to file questions with the Navy. That time is over."*

*"I wasn't in a position to ask questions. I was only eight years old when the ship disappeared."*

*"When the ship sank," Lieutenant Rowling asserted. "All the families received the sailor's wages, plus six month's salary, just as the law allows. If you're trying to reopen the issue to qualify for a pension, you can forget it. There's nothing worse than money-grubbing parasites coming to the government with outstretched hands."*

*Anna raised her chin a notch. "As you can see, I am gainfully employed and have no need for an orphan's pension. All I want is to know what happened to my father, and in light of this new information we've learned about the path of the 1878 hurricane, I'd like the Navy to correct its report." She cleared her throat, hoping her demand didn't sound too terse. "Please," she amended.*

This version tells what's happening, rather than allowing the reader to become invested in Anna and her story. In the first draft Elizabeth depends "too much on visual descriptions because they come easy to me. As I revise, I try to cut the visual descriptions and add the other four senses (touch, sound, scent, taste). This makes me reach for more original descriptions" that she hopes "are a little more interesting than just the visual details." Incorporating all the senses, writing more active sentences (e.g. not using "was" so often), fleshing out plot details, and "tightening up the language" are ways in which she shows the scene and places readers beside Anna to experience her emotions and reactions.

*It didn't take Anna long to realize the navy had no intention of thanking her for noticing an error in the fifteen-year-old report.*

*Oddly, it seemed they wanted her head on a platter.*

*"You've got a lot of gall," Lieutenant Gerald Rowland snapped from behind his mahogany desk. The bullnecked man began scolding Anna the moment she arrived.*

*Required to stand on the carpet before his desk while the seated officer snarled at her, Anna felt like a little brown sparrow quivering before a firing squad. She cleared her throat and tried to defend herself.*

*"When fifty-six men disappear in the middle of the ocean, a complete and accurate investigation should be conducted," she said quietly.*

*"That investigation was done fifteen years ago." Lieutenant Rowland banged his fist on the table, making the pens and inkbottles jump. "The USS Culpeper sank during a late season hurricane, all hands lost. Case closed."*

*Anna was well aware of what happened to the Culpeper. After all, her father had been one of the men who'd disappeared with that ship.*

*"That's the problem," she said, trying not to wilt under the blast of that man's glare. "The ship couldn't have sunk where the report claims. I'd like the case reopened so it can be corrected."*

*"Copies of that report were sent to the deceased sailors' families, and they were given a three-month period to file questions with the navy. That time is over."*

*"I wasn't in a position to ask questions. I was only twelve when the ship disappeared."*

*"When the ship sank," Lieutenant Rowland continued, "all the families received the sailor's*

wages plus six months of salary, just as the law allows. If you're trying to reopen the case to qualify for a pension, you can forget it."

Anna raised her chin a notch. "As you can see, I am gainfully employed and have no need for an orphan's pension. All I want is to know what happened to my father, and in light of this newly discovered error, I'd like the navy to correct its report."

In tweaking this scene, Elizabeth made other revisions. The first, although not visible here, was to insert a new scene before this one. "I believe novels live or die based on how the reader responds to the main character. I sweat bullets over how to convey Anna's character in the opening few scenes of the novel. She is introverted and shy, which is a tough sell to readers unless there is something extraordinarily likable or fascinating about her. My original opening . . . isn't a *bad* opening, but I needed to do better. By inserting a very brief opening scene of her joking with the congressional pages I not only got a chance to show Anna's quirky sense of humor, I was able to seamlessly plant important backstory that made the next scene flow much better. Thus, in the high-stress scene in which she gets chewed out, I hope the reader already likes Anna and feels some sympathy for her."

Another change keeps Anna from sounding "condescending...I need to convey that although Anna is shy, she is no pushover. One of the things I hoped to convey . . . is that shy people aren't necessarily *weak* people."

Elizabeth also felt the draft contained too much physical description. "I'd seen old photographs of the Naval Meeting room in the Capitol, and truly it looked like some where the Sun King would hold court. The room was amazing, but really, was it important for the reader to visualize? No. It was a historical detail that was interesting to me as a writer, but for the reader? I'd rather have the reader be intrigued by what happened to a ship and its crew, not distracted by the palatial luxury of a meeting room."

Other revisions altered minor details, such as Anna's age or the lieutenant's surname. The former was to allow Anna "more insight than an eight-year-old could realistically have. Also, the extra few years helped deepen the love and sense of comradery between Anna and her father." Elizabeth's tendency to "never . . . linger over details that are easy for me to clarify later" precipitated the other change. "Half the time when searching for names of my secondary characters I glance around my office and grab a name off a nearby book jacket. Obviously I was reading J.K. Rowling that week! I almost always change those names on the re-write."

To eliminate excess information from revisions Elizabeth relies on the mantra of "R.U.E. (Resist the Urge to Explain)! I tend to cram too much information into my first draft. All that really matters is that Anna thinks the official Navy report is wrong. The details don't matter, so I shortened it for clarity and to keep the pace brisk."

The fact that Elizabeth is a librarian also fleshes out Anna's character. "I've been an academic research librarian for about twenty years. I wrote deadly dull academic articles on the way toward earning tenure, but eventually decided to try my hand at historical fiction. I see it as a great dovetail between my research skills and love of a good story." Her research includes reading old memoirs because "it helps me avoid the 'wallpaper feel' of some historical novels." That's how she "stumbled across an obscure incident that is no more than a footnote in history, but I knew would be the basis for a great historical novel . . . My biggest concern was that it was so bizarre and outrageous I feared people would never believe such a thing could happen." Her historical note in *Beyond All Dreams* "explains the incident and the parts I fictionalized for the story."

Readers interested in learning more can visit Elizabeth at [elizabethcamden.com](http://elizabethcamden.com) or [www.facebook.com/ElizabethCamden](http://www.facebook.com/ElizabethCamden).

*Beyond All Dreams* was published in 2015 by Bethany House, pb, 368pp, 9780764211751. ❀



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