



THE RED PENCIL

Cindy Vallar analyzes the work behind published manuscripts. In this issue, she profiles Weina Dai Randel's *The Moon in the Palace* (Sourcebooks, 2016).

Ever since childhood, China has fascinated me. Time obscures the reason for this interest, although it may stem from Meng Li Jun, the first doll my mom received as a little girl that started her collection of dolls from around the world. Set during the Ming Dynasty, Meng Li Jun's story is a legend, but centuries earlier in the 7th century during the Tang Dynasty, a thirteen-year-old girl was summoned to the Imperial Palace to serve the emperor. She rose through the ranks to become Empress Wu,¹ China's first and only female ruler, who "ruled the kingdom for almost fifty years, during which the country thrived in trade, art, culture, military expansion and blossomed into a golden age."²

Weina Dai Randel's debut novel, *The Moon in the Palace*, tells of Wu Mei's early years, from ages five to twenty-two. What inspired her to write such a captivating tale of this controversial woman? After reading Maxine Hong Kingston's "No Name Woman"³ in graduate school, Weina "did a presentation about an unmarried woman who drowned herself because her pregnancy was considered a disgrace to her family and her village." She says, "I didn't like the story that much, and I wanted to tell my classmates that China had many strong women who were successful, and the first person who came to my mind was Empress Wu."

An early pivotal scene in *The Moon in the Palace* takes place three months after Mei arrives in the Imperial City. Although chosen as a Select, she has yet to meet Emperor Taizong. Here she meets Jewel, whom she believes is "one of the older Selects who were summoned to serve . . . years before. This scene is important because Jewel is one of the major rivals of Mei, and Jewel is not who she claims to be." In the draft this is part of another scene showing the Selects who are Mei's chamber mates; in the published version it stands alone. Weina explains why. "The draft focused on the Selects, but as I worked on it, I decided to focus on Jewel more. I have learned the end of a chapter is very important to the plot. Where we leave it usually leads to the next story line. Since the Selects are not the next story line," she reworked the scene to omit them as the following example demonstrates.

Draft:

"What makes you say that?"

"Isn't that obvious?"

I hesitated. "They're different."

"Well, I think you're different from anyone else here."

I tightened my grip on my basin. I didn't intend on complaining or soliciting sympathy from her but all of a sudden words poured out before I could swallow them. "Well, you don't know all these. Yesterday, one girl saw a pimple on her face. She screamed. For the whole day she cried. She was still crying when I came here this morning, two days –" I held out my fingers – "that's how long she cried."

"That's not a surprise."

"Well, it's a pimple, not a tumor."

"I won't argue with you." She smiled. "But I'd still be careful around them if I were you."

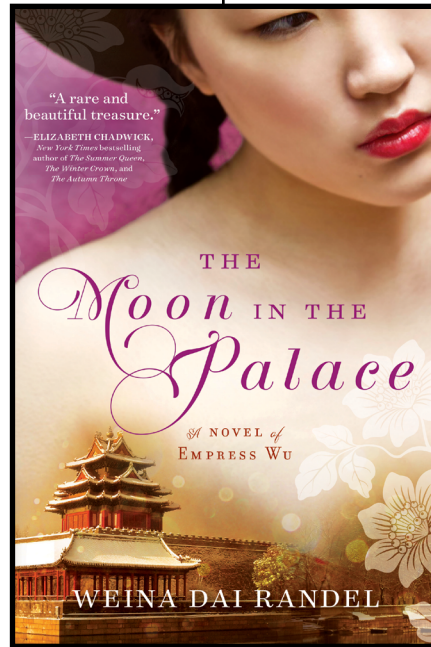
Somehow I felt better. "They don't bother me," I said, and put down my basin on the low-rise windowsill.

Published:

"What makes you say that?" I walked to the pavilion. Perhaps the woman had noticed my unhappiness, or heard the others make some comments about me.

She smiled, tucking a handkerchief in her pocket. "It would be hard to live here for anyone, especially if you have difficult chamber mates."

I put my basin down and sat on the windowsill. "I agree."



An author may like how she drafts a scene, but she also has to focus on what's most important to the whole story. Weina realized this as she worked on revisions. "When I wrote the draft, I thought it was cute to say 'it's a pimple, not a tumor,' and I wanted to keep that comment. But the problem with the draft was it focused on the conflict with the Selects, which is OK, but too much emphasis on the conflict clogs down the main plot – Mei's desire to see the Emperor. After all, the main goal at this point of Mei's life is to see the Emperor, and everything happening here should relate to that goal. If I elaborate on her relationship with the Selects, that'll slow down the plot considerably. So in the revision, I cut out all the comments and conflict with the Selects."

Cutting scenes is only part of what an author must do during revisions. Sometimes she has to flesh out the scene, as occurs in the scene below where Weina focuses more on Jewel and how Mei sees her.

Draft:

The woman herself was stunningly beautiful. She was young, despite her white hair. She had smooth skin, willowy eyebrows and a small, cherry-red mouth. Loops of white fringed her forehead, while two heaps of hair circled near her ears like the pointy ears of a feline.

*“You can call me Jewel,” she said.
“I’m Mei.”*

Published:

The woman herself was stunningly beautiful. She had willowy eyebrows and a small cherry-red mouth. Loops of white fringed her forehead, while two heaps of hair stood at both sides of her head like the pointy ears of a feline.

“How old are you? Fifteen?” She smoothed a scroll on the table and anchored the corners with the ink stone, ink sticks, and a calligraphy holder painted with white clouds and red peonies.

“Thirteen.” Most of the Selects were fourteen – another reason I did not fit in. I had bled for the first time the month before I came to the palace. My body was changing too, and my breasts were sore. But I still had the slender figure of a girl.

*“So young,” she said. “They call me Jewel.”
“I’m Mei.”*

The more vivid the depiction of the character, the better the reader is able to visualize her. Dialogue and action also help with this. In this example Mei compares Jewel to a cat because her physical features are reminiscent of the feline. “[M]ore importantly, there is a stealthy, secretive quality of Jewel that Mei senses but can’t quite voice. This is what I call to plant the seed of intrigue – I don’t want to say it directly. I only make it subtle – the observant readers will pick this clue up!”

She includes additional details about Mei because she believes “it’s always good to let the reader know what your main character looks like. I believe this will ground the reader better.” Also, since Mei is still growing from a child into a woman, “I think it is a good place to remind readers of how her body appears at this stage and what she thinks of it. In later chapters, you’ll also see how her body begins to take a womanly shape, and subsequently, how her mind reacts to that as well.”

Draft:

She fixed her gaze on me. Her eyes were like a cat’s, inscrutable, observing me quietly but refusing to be observed. She would make a powerful enemy. I felt uneasy.

Published:

She shook her head, her gaze fixed on me. Her eyes were like a cat’s, inscrutable, observing me quietly but refusing to be observed. I wondered what she was thinking.

Aside from again mentioning Jewel’s cat-like attributes, the change Weina makes between the two versions is more obvious. Jewel remains Mei’s enemy, but Weina deleted this reference in the published book because “this was revealed too early, too fast. Obviously Jewel hasn’t done anything that rouses Mei’s suspicion yet.”

The first time the protagonist meets the antagonist serves not only as an introduction to this character, but the scene also needs a purpose for the meeting. In this scene it serves to provide Mei with a way in which she might finally achieve her desire of seeing the Emperor. Since she has no powerful familial connections, Jewel offers her another way to catch the Emperor’s attention.

Draft:

As if knowing what was in my mind, Jewel said, “The Emperor is a collector. He collects women like flowers. Some arrived here ten years ago, and they’ve never had a chance to meet the Emperor.”

“Ten years?”

“As far as I know, no one in this court, let them be new Selects or not, has ever been summoned by the Emperor.”

That night, the girls’ chattering rang in my ears like a bell incessantly tolling. I could not sleep. I had not felt like this since Father died.

Published

“I did not mean to upset you, my friend.” She put down the brush. “Let me tell you something else. Every year on his birthday, the Emperor accepts gifts from his concubines, including us in the Yeting Court. If you give him an unforgettable gift, he may honor you by seeing you.”

“Oh, really?” I was excited. “What kind of gift?”

“Something unique.”

“It has to be, doesn’t it?” There must be

thousands of gifts from all the ministers, titled ladies, and all the other ladies. How could one gift stand out and attract his eye? "What have the ladies given him in the past?"

"Gold or expensive toys. Jewelry, silk robes, lapis lazuli even. I once offered him a horse."

A horse! One of the most treasured animals in the kingdom. The rebellion against the Sui Dynasty had cost many precious steeds. With peace at hand, horses were cherished and desired by every man. A conqueror like the Emperor certainly understood their value. "And he didn't summon you?"

Jewel shook her head.

"If he is not interested in seeing us" – I frowned – "why does he summon maidens to the palace each year?"

She sighed. "All I can tell you is our Emperor is a collector."

"Collector?"

"A general is no general if he has no soldiers, and what kind of Emperor would he be if he cannot have any woman he wishes in the kingdom?"

I would rather not think of myself as something to be collected, like the piece of bone relic Mother cherished. "So he would summon us, any of us, if he is interested in the gift?"

"That's right." She nodded, gazing at a group of women coming down the winding path to fetch water from the canal. "But let me tell you, for seven years, no one from the Yeting Court has impressed him."

"What are you going to give him this year?"

She shook her head. "I don't know yet."

I had a feeling she was unwilling to share her idea. I did not blame her. She must desperately wish to impress the Emperor and move to the real Inner Court.

In the rewrite Weina retains only a few words: "Emperor is a collector." She explains why: "The problem with the draft's ending is it's closed: Mei is upset that she can't see the Emperor, and that is it. It doesn't provide a direction for the next scene.

"In the published version, they are talking about the Emperor's birthday and gifts, and the possibility to meet the Emperor, which is Mei's goal. The scene after that talk will naturally have a direction. And Mei will find the 'unforgettable' gift in order to see the Emperor.

"So, you see, the plot moves and it moves efficiently."

Weina enjoys writing historical fiction because she likes history. She is "drawn to the past and the amazing people who

made an impact on other people's lives." This is evident in both *The Moon in the Palace* and its sequel *The Empress of Bright Moon* (Sourcebooks, April 2016). Born and raised in China, she is a gifted storyteller who brings to life the rich, exotic, historic tapestry of her homeland. Today she lives in Texas and is married with two children.

Reviewers have described *The Moon in the Palace* as an "eloquent first novel"⁴ with "fresh, lyrical prose."⁵ C. W. Gortner says Weina "spins a silken web of lethal intrigue, transporting us into the fascinating, seductive world of ancient China, where one rebellious, astute girl embarks on a dangerous quest for power."⁶ *Booklist's* starred review of *The Empress of Bright Moon* describes it as "[a] full immersion, compulsively readable tale that rivals both Anchee Min's *Empress Orchid* (2004), about the Dowager Empress Cixi, and the multilayered biographical novel *Empress* (2006), by Sa Shan, which also features Empress Wu."⁷

Weina invites you to visit her at www.weinarandel.com or connect with her at <https://www.facebook.com/weinadairandel> or <https://twitter.com/WeinaRandel>. If you'd like to have her chat with your book club about her books, please contact her at weinabooks2016@yahoo.com. ❀

Notes:

1. Empress Wu is also known as Wu Zetian.
2. Response from Weina Dai Randel from interview questions about her book.
3. The story "No Name Woman" appears in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (Knopf, 1976).
4. Starred review by Catherine Coyne, *Library Journal*.
5. Christy English, author *The Queen's Pawn* and *To Be Queen: A Novel Of The Early Life Of Eleanor Of Aquitaine*.
6. Online at http://www.weinarandel.com/?page_id=42.
7. Ibid.



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.