

Red Pencil

CINDY VALLAR *analyzes the work behind polished final manuscripts. In this issue, she profiles SIMON SCARROW'S The Eagle's Prophecy.*

Like many authors, Simon Scarrow did not quit his day job once **he signed his first publishing contract.** He began life in Nigeria and **lived in several countries** before he settled in Britain. His first job **after graduating from university** involved tax law and accounting, and it took two years before he realized he was better suited to teach. One of the high points of the academic year with his students was visiting Hadrian's Wall. Julius Caesar and his army first invaded England in 55 BC, but it was Emperor Hadrian who decided to build a wall along the northern frontier. Built in the 120s, this massive project stretched seventy-three miles (117 kilometers) from the river Tyne to the Solway Firth.

The first subject Simon chose to write about didn't involve Ancient Rome, however. He set his first novel in the Bahamas after a nuclear war. His second was a comedy thriller involving illegal drugs. He returned to the Bahamas in his third endeavor, a detective novel that he hoped to turn into a series. A few of his stories sparked some interest, but that contract proved elusive until he decided to write maritime historical fiction. Since a host of books centered on the Napoleonic era, Simon knew his stories needed to be different. "Rome was humming with sleuths," he said. "But no one had taken a military hero and plonked him down in the legions. So here was the virgin turf for a new kind of hero in a new setting, and I'm pleased to say that I'm the first author to use this setting in this way."

While readers are familiar with more recent history, many possess only a cursory knowledge of the Roman Empire and its army. This poses a problem for Simon since he doesn't want to lecture the reader or dump a collection of historical facts into his/her lap in order to comprehend the book. "So I decided to have my hero be a raw recruit to the legions. He would have to learn the ropes, and through him the reader could be 'trained' as well." Cato is that raw recruit, and he teams with Macro, a veteran centurion. They are introduced to readers in *Under the Eagle*, the first book to earn Simon a publishing contract in 1999.

My first introduction to Cato and Macro came when I received the sixth book in the series, *The Eagle's Prophecy*, to review for *Pirates and Privateers*. While pirates are central to the plot, *The Eagle's Prophecy* is very much about Ancient Rome, the imperial fleet, and politics. Neither protagonist appears in the scene we look at here, but from chapter two onward they take center stage. After their involvement in the death of a fellow centurion in Britain, Cato and Macro return to **Rome to learn their fates.** Pirates have seized a vessel and absconded **with important scrolls** that could undermine Rome and threaten the **emperor.** The imperial secretary offers Cato and Macro a chance to **restore their honor** – get those scrolls and destroy the pirates. The task seems **simple enough**, but the centurions don't trust Narcissus. With reluctance they accept the challenge, and before long they

realize just how treacherous and life-threatening this new assignment will be.

As with any story, the author must create the catalyst that propels the tale forward. Chapter one begins after the battle between the pirates and the merchant vessel ends. These paragraphs required only minor changes – the most important being changing Brindisium to Ravenna. Simon explains, "Brindisium was a major port at the time but the main naval base was at Ravenna and given the fleet's role in the novel it made sense to shift the focus north to the local HQ."



The three ships lifted as the gentle swell passed beneath their keels. From the high steering deck of the merchantman, the port of Ravenna was visible for a moment before the vessels slumped down into the trough. The merchantman was caught between two sleek liburnians, secured in place by several boarding hooks tethered to stout posts on the ships on either side. The pirates aboard the liburnians had shipped their oars and hastily dropped their mainsails before swarming aboard the merchantman. The assault had been hard-fought and bloody.

Proof of the fury of the attackers lay scattered upon the deck: the broken bodies of sailors, sprawled across dark smears of blood on the smooth, well-worn planking. In amongst them lay the corpses of over twenty of the pirates, and from the steering deck the captain of the larger liburnian frowned as he looked down on the scene. They had lost too many men taking the ship. Usually, the howling wave of armed men pouring over the side unnerved their victims so much that they dropped their weapons and surrendered at once. Not this time.

The crew of the merchant ship, together with a handful of passengers, had met the pirates right at the ship's rail and held them off with a gritty determination that the pirate captain could not recall seeing before – certainly not in the steady run of trading vessels he and his men had been preying on for the last few months. Armed with pikes, boathooks, belaying pins and a few swords, the defenders had held their ground as long as possible before they were forced back by superior numbers of better armed men.

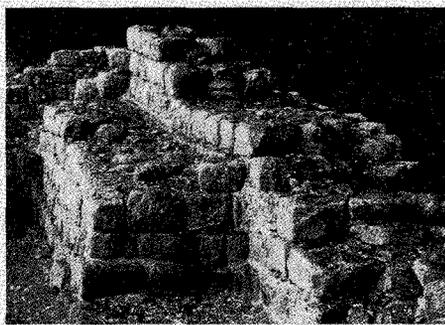
A consummate author, Simon tries to write five thousand words each week despite having two energetic toddlers at home. He writes from 10:00 p.m. to 2:00 a.m. when quiet rules and no one's awake to interrupt him. "The first thirty minutes are a headache but after that I find I . . . can write up to a thousand words an hour when the pace hots up." Sometimes the more one writes the more polished a manuscript becomes from the start. This is the case with Simon. As I compare the early draft he sent with the actual book, I notice how few changes were made from beginning to end. Like all manuscripts, however, Simon's still needs some polishing.

Four of them in particular had drawn the pirate captain's eye. Big, solid men in plain brown tunics, armed with short swords. They had fought to the end, back to back,

around the base of the mast, and had killed a dozen pirates before they had been overwhelmed and cut down. The captain himself had killed the last of them, but not before the man had slashed open his thigh. A mere flesh wound, now tightly bound up, but still throbbing with a painful intensity. The pirate captain made his way down onto the main deck, stepping over the bodies and cargo strewn across the planking. He stopped by the mast and prodded one of the four men with his boot, rolling the body onto its back. The man had the heavy brutal features of a gladiator. So had the others. Perhaps that explained their skill with the sword. Had they been part of the cargo, the pirate captain wondered? But then he saw a mark on the forehead of the man at his feet. He bent down and brushed aside a lock of dark brown hair to see the mark better and let out a hiss of surprise, and pity. The mark was the brand of Mithras, the secretive religion of the eastern legions, although it was steadily spreading throughout the ranks of the Roman army, and beyond. The captain instinctively raised a hand to the flaming red silk headband that he wore, fingers lightly brushing the material over his own brand. He let his hand drop, and rose back to his feet, still looking down at the dead Roman. A legionary, then, as were the others.

At first glance this paragraph might seem fine, but to an editor it can be improved. The first two sentences should be one, for the second is not a sentence since it lacks a verb and there's no real reason to accentuate these facts by allowing them to stand alone. The same holds true when describing the pirate captain's wound. Both instances are addendums to the preceding sentences. The details clarify, but aren't so important as to warrant emphasis. This passage would also work better as two paragraphs. The first half concerns the fighting, but the second half takes a closer look at one particular man – the one who wounded the captain. The excessive details, while interesting, detract from the flow of the story. Comparing the fallen man's features to those of a gladiator might confuse the reader, for Hollywood's portrayal of these fighters tends more toward handsome leading men like Russell Crowe, rather than features that connote brutality in their lives. Simon decided to delete reference to the Mithras' branding because "[it] was

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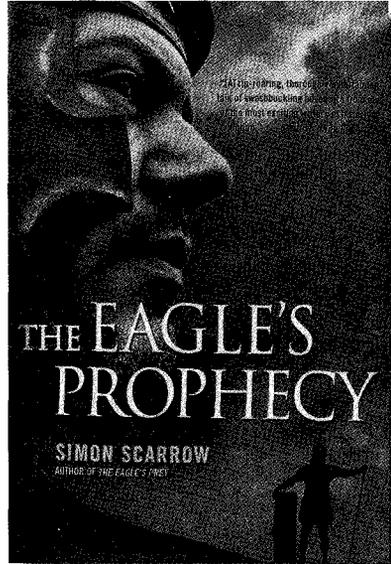


a detail that did not seem to add to the scene and as the first draft was quite long this was chosen for the chop."

What follows is the final version of this segment. Which do you feel

better maintains the story's pace while providing you with sufficient information to form an image in your mind without bogging down the story with incidental details?

Four of them in particular had drawn the pirate captain's eye: big, solid men in plain brown tunics, armed with short swords. They had fought to the end, back to back, around the base of the mast, and had killed a dozen pirates before they had been overwhelmed and cut down. The captain himself had killed the last of them, but not before the man had slashed open his thigh – a flesh wound, now tightly bound up, but still throbbing with a painful intensity.



The pirate captain made his way down on to the main deck. He stopped by the mast and prodded one of the four men with his boot, rolling the body on to its back. The man had a soldier's build and bore several scars. Like the others. Perhaps that explained their skill with the sword. He rose to his feet, still looking down at the dead Roman. A legionary then, as were the man's companions.

Eventually, the pirate captain confronts the prisoners, who cower near the vessel's bow.

He nearly smiled as he saw one of the sailors trembling as he tried to edge away from the pirate. The captain forced himself to keep his face devoid of expression. It was far more intimidating that way. Beneath the dark, matted locks of his hair, piercing black eyes looked out from beneath a strong brow. His nose was broken and twisted, and knotted white scar tissue curved up across his chin, over his lips and up his cheek. It was a wonderful effect, but the injuries were not the marks of experience born by a life-long pirate. Rather, they had been with him since childhood and, since his parents had dumped him as an infant in the slums of Piraeus, he had never known their cause. The passengers and crew of the merchantman wilted before him as the captain drew up, a sword's length away and ran his dark eyes over them.

"Who's the captain?" He spoke in Greek, to the sailors.

There came no reply, just the nervous breathing of men facing a cruel and imminent fate. The captain's eyes never left them as his hand reached down and slowly drew the blade of his scimitar.

A key component in any attack is how much fear the pirates can instill in their victims. The greater the fear, the more easily cowed they are. A rogue's appearance can enhance that intimidation; it is one reason why most people are familiar with Blackbeard even if they know

Historical fiction . . . is allowed to creatively fill in the gaps left by the historical facts. – Simon Scarrow

nothing else about pirates. Simon captures this use of psychological terror with his pirate captain in the initial passage, but after some revisions, his villain becomes more fearsome and the reader better understands the reference to the pirate's childhood.

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"I am Telemachus, the leader of these pirates," he said in Greek, to the terrified sailors. "Where is your captain?"

There came no reply, just the nervous breathing of men facing a cruel and imminent fate. The pirate captain's eyes never left them as his hand reached down and slowly drew his falcata.

One sentence missing from the final version is "It was far more intimidating that way." In writing, we refer to this as telling—something we should avoid. It's better to show readers the intimidation, which Simon does through his description of Telemachus. His appearance is so repugnant the reader senses it intimidates people, so why should Simon also tell the reader this? The slight alteration in the wording provides a distinct clue about Telemachus. He *knows* how intimidating he looks and he uses this to his advantage. Where did the ideas for these physical traits come from? "[H]e's based on a fierce-natured Greek I met in St. Lucia once. A very wise and amusing man, but utterly ruthless and callous, as I discovered."

Giving the character a name makes him more real. Throughout the early draft of this chapter, Simon refers to him as "the pirate captain" or "the captain." Simon wanted his pirates to be Greek, and the changes he instituted accomplish this without explaining it to the reader. Telemachus, a Greek name, is one Homer used, so readers will be familiar with it. He introduces himself because "[h]e's an egotistical type and wants those he has defeated to know he was responsible."



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The other minor, but important, change involves Telemachus' weapon. Not familiar with this blade, I asked why. "The falcata was a more typically [G]reek weapon than the curved blades of the [M]iddle [E]ast and I wanted the Greek identity

of the pirates to be a dominant feature."

Writers of historical fiction strive for authenticity in their novels. A factual error can anger readers. When I worked as a librarian at the Baltimore County Public Library in Maryland, I sometimes came across novels in which readers wrote comments in the margin pointing out anachronisms. Sometimes, though, it is for the sake of the readers that an author alters a word choice in spite of being historically accurate. Initially Simon used "books" to describe the contents of the chest. In the final version, he changed it to "scrolls" because "[r]eaders tend to think of Roman literature in scroll form, despite there being bound books as we would understand them. So this change is for the reader with a casual understanding of the ancient world. It saves would-be savants the time and effort of writing to 'correct' me."

Although Simon did not begin writing historical fiction, it is the genre that has brought him success. He writes it "[b]ecause I love the way in which it allows . . . a reader to have an imaginative vacation from the here and now. A lot of fiction uses a contemporary setting but has to slip into some kind of James Bond mode of fantasy in order to entertain. Historical fiction, by contrast, is obliged to be faithful to the facts as far as it can and so there is a sense of being a tourist rather than the literary equivalent of a couch potato." He also points out, "I'm a great reader of history books, and am frustrated by the way good historians can create an exciting tale, but have to be faithful to historical method. Historical fiction . . . is allowed to creatively fill in the gaps left by the historical facts, and that's what makes the world of historical fiction so very tangible."

Simon's Eagle series successfully transports readers back to the Roman Empire, and his stories convey this period to them in terms with which they can readily identify. One doesn't have to be an expert in classical history to enjoy Cato and Macro's adventures, even though Simon immerses himself "in Roman culture and the tiny details of military life" for three or four months before he actually writes the book. His knowledge and interest shine through. "I think that what impresses me most about Rome is the sheer scale of what they achieved for such a long period of time. The traces of their civilization still abound in terms of ruins and those aspects of their culture tha[t] have passed down to us." This allows him to "recreate a world that [is] at once familiar and yet provide[s] a very different world to explore."

Cindy Vallar is a freelance editor, an associate editor for Solander, and the author of The Scottish Thistle (www.cindyvallar.com/scottishthistle.html). A retired librarian, she also writes about pirates, teaches workshops, and reviews books.