

What about historical romance? It hasn't had a decent innings in the UK since the 1970s. Surely it's time for a revival? Look how popular the big US historical romance authors are on amazon.co.uk. There's only so many times you can re-read your old Heyer, Holt, Seton and Lofts paperbacks. It's Quinn, Quick, Laurens & Chase from Amazon, selected branches of Borders and specialist bookshop Murder One in London. The last time I had to so determinedly chase imports were the days when I had a seven-inch record collection.

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Fiction can be a time machine to the past in the way in which academic history often cannot. I studied history at university and toyed with becoming an academic historian, but those historians I admired were not the ones writing tomes of original thought but those who wrote history in such a way that it made it into popular bookshops, and could be understandable and absorbing to the general public. Such as James Sharpe's *Dick Turpin, the Myth of the English Highwayman*, described by the *Sunday Telegraph* as, "crisp, colourful and possessed of appropriately large quantities of dash." Or Andrew Roberts' *Napoleon and Wellington: The Long Duel*, described by the *Sunday Times* as "entertaining" and by *The Observer*, as "thoroughly enjoyable, beautifully written." There are many other examples I could mention but good history can be as enjoyable as historical fiction. To me what often most helps to make or break an historical novel is its sense of time and place. The challenge for historical fiction is to be good history.

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## Red Pencil

CINDY VALLAR analyzes the work behind polished final manuscripts. In this issue, she focuses on Mark McAllister's *There Is a Wideness*.

Contrary to what some people think, writing is tough work. Every book begins with an idea, then the author must research the time, place, society, and historical events in order to turn the idea into a story. Next comes the writing of the book, but this is just the first draft. Authors have to edit, revise, and edit again until their stories become ones publishers find compelling enough to print and readers want to read. Yet, some writers define this stage in the writing process as a necessary evil. So why do it? Michael Seidman, an editor and the author of *The Complete Guide to Editing Your Fiction*, explains it best. "There are as many reasons not to edit and revise as there are reasons not to write. But one of the things that separates the professional writer from the amateur and hopeful is the pro's willingness to take the time to read, revise and edit her manuscript before sending it off to an agent or publisher." The more polished the manuscript, the better your chances are of obtaining representation or a publishing contract.

What scenes need to be cut? Which ones require embellishment? Are the characters three-dimensional? These are some of the questions writers must answer during the difficult process of editing and

revising. The intent of *Red Pencil* is to assist writers in the editing stage and to help readers better understand the process authors go through to craft their books. A historical novelist provides samples of his/her novel – the draft and the version that got published. Together, we'll examine what motivated the changes and how the author made them, as well as the particular aspects of the craft of writing that the samples highlight.

When asked to write this column, one particular author came to mind – Mark McAllister. I had reviewed his debut novel, *There Is a Wideness*, for the November 2004 issue of *The Historical Novels Review*. Several months had passed since I read the book, but it continued to haunt my thoughts, in part because I was an educator for twenty years, in part because I had recently moved to Texas where the story takes place. More importantly, I experienced the characters' shock, grief, sadness, and hope. I felt as if I personally witnessed the explosion that killed some three hundred students and teachers, just as Mark's mother did in 1937.



Genevieve Langham McAllister was born and raised in East Texas. Before she married, she taught music at the elementary school in New London. On the afternoon of 18 March 1937, she walked toward the high school to attend a Parent-Teacher Association meeting. Her companion, also a teacher, had forgotten her cigarettes and

returned to fetch them while Genevieve waited on the sidewalk. Doing so probably saved both their lives. At 3:17 P.M. an explosion, caused by a gas leak beneath the building, demolished the high school. Investigators later determined that had those in the school been able to smell the gas, officials would have evacuated the building prior to the explosion. The Texas Legislature then passed a law that required the addition of malodorants that allow people to smell the gas. Among the journalists who covered the story was a young reporter who worked for the Dallas bureau of United Press International (UPI). His name? Walter Cronkite. Later in life, he said, "I did nothing in my studies nor in my life to prepare me for a story of the magnitude of that London tragedy...."

Mark McAllister asked his mother about the explosion, but she never could tell him of her initial impressions following the blast. When schools reopened, she continued to teach in New London where she eventually met and married Mark's father, Bill McAllister in 1941. Mark was born three years later.

Now retired from a career as an electrical engineer, Mark devotes his days to bicycling, playing bridge, maintaining his house and cars, reading, and occasionally teaching Sunday School. When I asked him why he wrote this particular book, he said, "I came up with the basic story idea in 1981 after visiting the site of the tragedy. Soon afterward we moved to California for a new job, and started a family. The story idea faded, but never went away. After moving back to Texas in 1995, I got what I will describe as a nagging feeling that I should give the

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story a try. I knew I had some writing ability, and the presence of great research facilities at the University of Texas added to the nag. Once I started writing, finishing it became a personal challenge. I knew I had to give it my best.”

The Depression hit East Texas long before the Stock Market crashed, but Luke Robertson supports his ailing mother and younger sister Marty after his father dies in *There Is a Wideness*. When oil is discovered, Luke takes a job in the oil fields. Before his mother's death, he promises to take care of Marty forever. But then the explosion at the high school kills his sister and many of her friends. Devastated, Luke leaves Texas, but ten years later something compels him to return to the cemetery where Marty is buried. There he meets Russ, the caretaker. To Russ, the words on the headstones are just names. In anger, Luke tells his long-buried story so Russ will know who each of the children were and how their loss impacted him and the entire town. Russ, however, has his own secrets, one of which ties directly into the deaths of Marty and her friends.

When Mark sat down to write *There Is a Wideness* in the summer of 1997, all he had was the basic concept of the plot – the explosion his mother witnessed – and the idea of telling one man's loss, leaving, return, and redemption. This is what he wrote:



Mark McAllister

*Walter Robertson dreamed of moving west.*

*Not that a man couldn't make a living in the little farm town of Winona, Mississippi, but Walter had abilities that other men lacked, and with those abilities went a certain ambition and a drive to better himself. He knew mules and could handle a team as well as any man in the county. Working with tools came naturally to him, and he could fix a wagon, build a shed, lay a water line, and fine-tune a cranky boiler. Yes, other men could do many of these things, but Walter had another talent: he understood finance. His father had taught him how to balance the books of the family's drayage business, and Walter came to understand how money was made, and lost. And with that understanding came a restlessness and a longing for independence. Walter wanted to work his own business.*

When I first read this rough draft, I had two thoughts. Who was Walter Robertson? Why would this passage cause anyone to read further? The first sentence and the opening scene of a story must hook the reader. If they don't, the reader has no reason to keep reading. You would assume from the first sentence that the story is about Walter, but he's not the protagonist. He's Luke's father and plays only a minor role in the finished version. The reason this opening scene doesn't work is that it misdirects the reader in regards to time and setting. "Moving west" gives the impression of the American frontier, so the reader assumes it takes place far earlier than the 1930s.

Mark decided he hadn't given the novel his best shot, so he started over. He outlined the story, drew up a timeline of events, and researched the history of oil in East Texas and the building of the Grand Coulee dam and the Hanford plutonium plant. Eleven months later, he had a 140,000-word novel that opened this way:

*In his youth he was restless, and the restless boy became a restless man. Like other restless men caught up in routine lives, he sometimes looked for signs that he should act on the impulses that tempted him. For Walter Robertson such a sign was the arrival of the new century, in his twenty-fourth year.*

Want to read the next paragraph of the book? Probably not. The hook is interesting, but not compelling, and using "restless" four times in two sentences borders on boring the reader. Also, Mark still leads the reader to believe that his story is about Walter rather than Luke. Instead of beginning the story with an event or action pertinent to the story that engages the reader and identifies the problem or puzzle to be solved, Mark makes the mistake of beginning the book with background material. Backstory is essential to any novel, but it must be seamlessly woven into the entire story rather than dumped on the reader at the beginning. While this revision is readable, it's not publishable, so he tried again.

*The voices awoke him again, and he wondered: Why are they talking so loud? They're in the same room!*

*Luke had often heard them after he went to bed, his mother and father, in their bedroom, talking. But in the past they had talked softly, and he had not understood what they were saying. And it had never bothered him that he could not understand them. He had found comfort in the soft voices, and he had often fallen asleep while the voices continued.*

*But in the past week there had been a change. Now the voices were loud, and angry, and he could sometimes understand the words. And on this night he heard his mother say, "You were drunk! You didn't give me time! You're drunk now!"*

For the first time, Mark clearly identifies the protagonist. The opening sentence is intriguing. We want to know who's arguing and why. While we don't know when the story takes place, we know Luke is a child in bed at night. His parents' arguments upset him, something with which most of us readily identify. Yet, the scene only goes partway in drawing us into the story. It lacks vividness, power. The hook is supposed to carry you along, but this one seems complete without enticing us to turn the page.

Mark writes the story using the most common point of view, third-person omniscient. It allows us to know some calamity is unfolding, but the protagonist lacks this awareness. One problem, though, is that in using this voice, the story lacks intimacy. Also, the author tends to intrude himself into the scene, as Mark does when he inserts "he heard" into the last sentence. Since this is Luke's point of view, no one else overhears what his mother says. Therefore, there's no need to tell the reader Luke heard the angry words.

In studying how to write fiction, authors often write a scene in different points of view to see which works best. Mark opted to rewrite his story using a different voice, that of first person. Doing so allowed him to create Luke from the inside out and to share his personal observations with the reader. The very nature of first person, though, limits the author. The story unfolds only from the experiences of a particular character. Mark decided that telling the story solely from Luke's perspective wasn't sufficient. He chose Russ,

the caretaker of the cemetery, as the primary voice for *There Is a Wideness*. When I asked him why he made this decision, he said, "Originally the story was written in third-person omniscient, starting with Luke's boyhood and proceeding to the ending in which Luke returns to the site of the tragedy in late middle age. But the story was too big, too ambitious. Who was telling this huge story? God? It would seem that only God could tell it, but God doesn't write novels. I needed to limit the viewpoint, and it was a great moment for me when I realized that Russ could tell the story – not only Luke's story, as Luke told it to him, but his own story. As I wrote with this new viewpoint, Russ's story grew in importance. My feeling now is that, while Luke Robertson is a believable character, he is not as interesting as Russ. Luke's redemption seems inevitable, in a way, but Russ's salvation must await Luke's. To me the story has a great twist – it is not Russ who saves Luke, but Luke who saves Russ! I certainly didn't foresee all this when I started writing in 1997, and still am somewhat awed as to how it all came together."

It took Mark another sixteen months before he felt the polished version was good enough to submit to a literary agent. Even then, he still wasn't finished editing. A potential publisher's comments led to additional revisions, and once River Oak contracted the book, Mark still had more edits to do until he had these opening paragraphs of the final, published version of *There Is a Wideness*.

*Memory leaks out of an old man like fine sand from a burlap bag, and I must write down Luke Robertson's story before the details sift away and become lost. Just yesterday I tried to recall the name of that fellow at the dam who found Luke's ledge on the canyon wall, and it was a full ten seconds before "Bob Coleman" popped into my head. Power plant engineer. Worried about the river and the salmon. Sure, now I remember. But what about all the other voices and places and events from Luke's story? Can I recall them? Details matter.*

*I have mixed feelings about this undertaking. At the center of the story is a tragedy, a school explosion that happened ten years ago in 1937. Here in East Texas the memory of that event is raw and unhealed, and some people will say that writing about the tragedy is like tearing at the wound. I worry that those people might be right.*

*But I believe Luke's story needs a permanence, and writing it down is the only way to achieve that. Luke is not a writer. I am the one to do it, and now is the time, while my health is still good. I'll be seventy-one in January.*



New London School Explosion web site [www.nlse.org](http://www.nlse.org)

*Luke's story links with my own. I have lived the past ten years in a fog of fear and uncertainty. I have held a secret, and the fear of someone learning that secret has caused me to live a solitary and careful existence. But now I see a purpose. I have handed my fears, and my secret, to the winds.*

*His story begins where many stories end, in a graveyard. I first encountered Luke at Pleasant Hill Cemetery, in the heart of the East Texas oil country, at sundown three months ago.*

This is the quintessential opening hook of a story. Each word used is essential. Mark shows rather than tells. He clearly establishes place, character, conflict, and purpose. He draws us into the story and compels us to read further, to learn more about the tragedy that forever changed Luke, to discover Russ's secret.



According to Persia Woolley (author of *How to Write and Sell Historical Fiction*), "The best fiction reads effortlessly, as though the story simply tells itself. But often an immense amount of time, consideration and just plain brain-racking went into the refining, rewriting, cutting and polishing necessary to achieve those results." Mark agrees. "The end product is a far cry from my first draft. But the journey has been fun and educational, and the outcome gratifying."

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Scenes from the New London School explosion, on which Mark McAllister based his novel