



Editor Interview — Pat Dobie

By Alex Clermont—November 30, 2015

You need an editor. That's not a comment on your writing skills, so much as the fact that you're a human being and imperfect by nature. No matter your level of skill you need an editor because writing is a very solitary exercise. Seeing things only from your perspective leads to obvious mistakes or complications that a second set of eyes will pick up.

Pat Dobie is a great second set of eyes. A Vancouver-based editor, this canuck has been working with words for years. Below she's answered a couple of questions about editing, being an editor and how you can take a critical look at your writing.

If you're still not convinced of the need for an editor check out this great article by Dick Margulis titled, "[Five Reasons Why Self-Publishing Authors Need an Editor.](#)" The arguments listed are for self-publishers, but I think the arguments generalize to anyone who puts words together. Remember, we're all human.

Alex Clermont: So I wanted to ask you about your history as an editor. I'm curious which pursuit came first, writing or editing. What drove you to editing as a full-time pursuit?

Pat Dobie: Writing came first by decades—I remember in sixth grade I wrote a complicated super-long rhyming poem during Math class. Editing came around 2009 when

I was doing a lot of critiquing for fellow writers and then did an MFA in Writing. The MFA gave me the tools and vocabulary to really kick ass as a reader of other writers' work.

I learned how to edit from the writers who mentored me in my MFA. It was a low residency program and so we worked one on one—they read my stuff and commented. That's where I saw really masterful close reading and experienced what a huge difference it made to my own prose.

AC: When reading the work of other writers, is there a particular thing you look for? What are the elements you focus on when trying to perfect another author's piece?

PD: I look for what they're trying to do—what's the story, who are the characters—and I point out everything that interferes with the reader's ability to have the experience the writer wants them to have. To do this, though, I read it many different ways. First, I read just to find out what happens. Then I read again—two or three times, depending what kind of edit it is—and do all kinds of voodoo to understand the piece.

I take apart the structure, look at scene dynamics, characterization, pacing, line edits to free up the prose and cut away the underbrush. And so on. It's not so much that I'm trying to perfect their work, it's that I'm trying to help the work become as fully realized as it can be. As fully, intensely, itself as possible.

AC: I imagine that can be a little hard. Even though writers, and people in general, may say they're open to criticism most can tolerate it only up to a point. Is there a defensiveness you've had to get over with writers? I mean, I'M totally open to other viewpoints but some of those other guys...

PD: Ha ha! I hear you. I have not found this. By the time I get past the sample edit stage with a writer, they know they're going to get the truth from me. So the ones who proceed, who say, "Yes, I want you to edit my book," are ready for it. They're hungry for it, I think. I'm sure there's some cussing and fist-shaking in my general direction from time to time, but I don't hear it because I'm way up here in Vancouver. (laughs)

But seriously, I think it's because I love to work with hungry writers, those who are intent on getting their book to the next level. That's the kind of writer I am myself. We have a lot of respect for each other, is my feeling.



AC: Having seen your fair share of first drafts, are there any common denominators as far as an issue you've seen pop up over and over again. What can a writer do in advance to pass through the eye of the Pat Dobie needle?

PD: Hmm. That's a good question. Each manuscript I get is different and writers are good at different elements. Some have strong characters, but not enough conflict, whether internal or external, to keep the reader turning pages. Ask yourself: what does my character want in this scene? Characters need to want something even if, as Kurt Vonnegut Jr. said, it's just a glass of water. Then see them try to get what they want or, equally interesting, try to stop what they don't want.

Some have a ton of stuff happening, but they haven't gotten the reader attached enough to the characters to care about what happens. Ask yourself: does the reader care? Know that the reader is still deciding whether to engage with your piece, especially in the early pages. Some pieces start well then get bogged down in flashbacks and

narrative summary about backstory, with no forward momentum in the character now.

Ask yourself: what's going on in the room right now? What's the last action the character took? If it's been three pages of musing, maybe your story needs to start in a different place. Then there's the physical appearance of the manuscript. Some have paragraphs all the same length, so the reader starts zoning out—because it's all narrative summary or exposition, and not enough dialogue or gesture/movement. So look at your page objectively, look for white space.

On the prose level, writers can look for wordiness ("I shrugged my shoulders, thinking to myself he was ..."), over-qualifying, or explaining, stage direction (telling us how a character got up to turn off the light, for example, when it's not important) and generally just tighten it up.

On a purely practical level, for some types of editing I charge by the word. And publishers like novels to be in a certain range. So if your novel's 160,000 words, take a really good look at whether scenes repeat, characters can be conflated, and on the smaller level, get in there with a scalpel and cut, cut, cut. The main thing to remember is that your only job, your *sole concern* as a writer, is to get the reader to turn the page.

AC: So what are you working on now?

PD: Thanks for asking! Editing-wise, I'm working on a murder mystery and a self-help book. Writing wise, I just finished the second draft of a novel set in present day, about a guy who thinks that a severed foot that washed ashore might belong to his brother. And I'm trying to get a short story in better shape. I write about 2 short stories a year and it takes me years to get them in shape to submit, partly because I'm obsessed with novels. Finally, I'm starting research for a novel set in 1893 Chicago, about a doctor who's experimenting on desperate men to find a cure for addiction.

AC: Your NaNoWriMo project?

PD: I didn't do NaNoWriMo this year, but I'm hoping to get a residency somewhere next spring or summer, so I can write all day, every day. But I won't be ready for a while; I have to let the research help me find the plot. I did the first draft for the severed foot story during NaNoWriMo a few years back.

AC: Great to hear you're making the most of your time. Thanks for the interview, Pat!

PD: You're welcome!