

Letter to the Editor

Dear Mom,
The cheesecake arrived, and it was wonderful, although a bit more caloric than I really need. No, I'm not blaming you for being fat, that is, for me being fat; your being fat is your business, and I'm not commenting on it. My being fat is my own responsibility, and I accept that in the spirit of my dear departed father, your husband, who didn't have anything nice to say about fat people, but we loved, or respected, him anyway. So thanks again, and next time if they have any of the raspberry-coffee ones that would be great.

Yes, the book is done and I've sent the damn thing off to the editor. And now I'm a sitting duck. Literally. Except she doesn't let anyone use that word, 'literally,' in any context other than prose criticism. But here I am, sitting on my hands, and I can just see her blue pencil, hovering over every word, especially the parts I like best. Of course the parts I like, since she knows damn well what will get to me and how much I can take.

Hey, I'm OK with a little give and take. Even her transparently false obsequious emails, pretending to apologize for the cavalier changes she's about to inflict. As if I had anything to say about it. She's got all the cards, and I'm over a barrel, and we both know that.

Just between you and me, Mom, but I edit her emails, and it's so easy to find every one of her stupid mistakes. She thinks she's such a great writer, but she uses dashes as punctuation, and run-on sentences, and incomplete sentences, and my god, adverbs all over the place. If there were dialog in her emails it would read like Tom Swift. So she's not such a great writer. No big surprise; I don't know why I would expect her to be. What else can a failed

writer do besides monkey around thwarting the efforts of other, more real, writers? It's so obvious it's hardly worth mentioning. Which is why I'll do her a favor and not harp on it. Not that she's done me any favors, or realizes how accommodating I'm being.

She's been hassling me for months about deadlines. As if a writer needs that kind of pressure. Months! Without a letup. I could have finished in a few weeks, but it took much longer, weeks longer, thanks to all these scheduling interruptions. They wilt your spirit, sap your strength, weaken your resolve, distract your attention, and keep you up at night. And that all adds up to delays, delays, and more delays. She knows that perfectly well.

Last winter it was already nearly six months late, so a lot of water has gone under the bridge, I know not where. Where does bridge water go, anyway? Well, you have to specify the river, or whatever body of water it happens to be. Doesn't matter. This is all just speculation, and we both know what's likely to happen to it. Every time I digress, even the tiniest amount, she whacks it. The big blue circle with the pig's tail. Why a pig? What a cruel passive-aggressive way to add insult to injury! And it's a long-standing tradition, so there's no likelihood any of this despicable ilk will ever switch to a fox tail, or a peacock feather, or even merely a discreet non-triumphant non-gloating 'x.' If you look closely, it's actually a broken pig's tail, which is even more perverse, and should give you some idea what I'm up against.

Obviously, knowing what's in store for every single word I write, knowing they're all going to walk the plank and hesitate over the abyss for a moment, during which they've already been forgotten and dismissed without a twinge of remorse— Knowing this, since it's inevitable and has never changed, even once, except for the birthday greeting I sent her ten years ago, and that wasn't a submission anyway (although she edits my emails and keeps the markup to herself)— Anyway, knowing what's going to happen in her literary abattoir, as I'm sure she fondly thinks of it, cynically oblivious to the horrors perpetrated there— Knowing this, how can she, or the publisher, or the damned board of directors, or the shareholders, expect someone in my position to meet these preposterous deadlines? You can't weep all day and then suddenly get productive, or weep all night and get up wanting anything but an end to it. They know I

can't, but for them it's just a date scrawled on a calendar in some suit's office high above Ground Zero.

So the thing is in the mail now—not email, mind you, but in a cardboard box, if you can believe it, the one the blank paper came in, typed out, that is, printed out double-spaced as if we were still in the tenth century and books were scratched out by hand with pictures at every drop-cap. God willing it will arrive intact for her to rip to pieces to impose her narrow-minded pedantry on every deft phrase I've managed to contrive, with far more effort, I might add, than she will ever need to destroy it.

Your loving son,
J. C., author



Prof. George Saunders
Syracuse University, New York
Dear Prof. Saunders,

I am writing to enlist your aid in my battle against the philistines at the publishing company. I know you've been up against this wall of ignorance and have fought bravely these blue-pencil brandishing hacks. I know you're probably relieved, if you're anything like myself, and I know you are, because you must be, and how could you not be?, to know there are at least a few more of us out here. If we got together, we could stamp out the whole editorial profession once and for all.

What do you suggest?

I realize you're a busy writer, producing your funny and slightly outlandish stories, if you don't mind my saying so, but they are often pretty outlandish, to coin a phrase, not really, and also fighting the good fight that I mentioned in the previous paragraph. So I don't want to clutter up your life with my own petty problems, given all your students and advisees and such. Plus responding to all the baseless criticism from critics and reviewers and independent book-store "curators." Plus obviously legions of illiterate prescriptionist editors and proofers and what-not. Or not responding, since we both know you're above all that, but still, you probably have little time for unsolicited demands from the likes of me, whom you don't know yet, but will, hopefully, so I'll be brief.

What are the chances you could write a mildly forceful note to Mrs. E.,

at the publisher, and just let her have it in no uncertain terms, if you catch my drift. No, actually, I mean just tell her she doesn't have to trash every damn word I write, and it would be OK to just for once, for god's sake, to leave things as they were intended, and not keep up these niggling little tweaks and switcheroos that pick away at everything I've worked so hard at and end up whittling it down to nothing, to a triviality, to a sham of actual writing, something the first few dozen monkeys could have produced in a couple of weeks. Your note should be strong, obviously, since she doesn't respond to reasoning and polite discourse, but not so strong as to piss her off any more than she always is, if that's even possible. Maybe the whole enterprise is hopeless. I don't know.

But you do see what my problem is, as it's the same one you've dealt with a thousand times, probably even more, given how many stories you've gotten into print in the last few years. Or maybe you're not writing as much now. I wouldn't blame you if the sheer futility of getting past editors unscathed is what's stifling your productivity. Or more likely, you're more prolific than ever, but they just won't let any of it into print without more hassle and pushback than you're willing to summon, after all these long years in the war.

So I would really appreciate any assistance, in general or especially in that note to Mrs E. (thank you!), with whatever clever and experienced slant you care to apply, so as to get her to listen to her own better judgment for once, just this one time, regarding my manuscript, which I finished right on schedule, after a few extensions like any writer might need, and sent in as required, printed out on actual paper in a cardboard box, which I don't mind saying was an imposition surely concocted to annoy, since they have to re-key the whole thing anyway. Are they still using linotypes? My god.

Anyway, many thanks for all your assistance. I'll drop Mrs. E a line, just to let her know you're in my camp and are about to send her a forceful and award-winning professional endorsement of my work and how it will best serve everyone involved if she just leaves it alone and lets the writer do what he was trained to do so much better than she ever could anyway. At least justice will be served in some small way, and I assure you, your support won't go unacknowledged, and it's already appreciated more than I can say.

Yours truly,
J. C., author



Prof. Donald Barthelme
University of Houston, Texas
Dear Prof. Barthelme,

I am writing to you because obviously you must have met, like myself, with extraordinary resistance to the way you write. That your stories managed to penetrate the wall of unimaginative hide-bound editorial people at the publisher is testimony to your perseverance and intestinal fortitude, and you have my deepest admiration and respect. I can't imagine how they could have buckled to your requirements, especially syntactically, since they are dyed in the wool prescriptivists and couldn't possibly abide more than one or two sentences in any of your many extraordinary stories. I mention this only because I am experiencing much the same resistance to my own work, which has recently been submitted to the publisher and is now at the mercy of Mrs. E., of whom I'm sure you have much to say, but in the vaulty heights of professional achievement you are no doubt reluctant to make public. Nevertheless, clearly we are in similar situations, and it is my fervent hope that we can work together against Mrs. E. and her frustrated cretinous compatriots in the editorial department and see that Art might once again prevail against base, stultifying Convention.

After writing the above, it has just come to my attention that you are dead. I had not anticipated this, since it was my fond hope that we might find some common ground on which to take our stand together against the forces of pedantry. Nevertheless, I find that hope dearly held can overshadow the harsh light of reality, however stark that light may be. But since you are deceased, there may not be much point in continuing to implore you to contact Mrs. E. on my behalf and use what considerable editorial leverage you no doubt possess to quell her insatiable penchant for slashing and hacking perfectly good English into a mincemeat salad, a kind of verbal hags that nobody but a sick Scot would consume.

On the other hand, once the muse gets my momentum going, it can be difficult, as in the present circumstances, which find me flirting with desperation, to rein it in. Nor would I wish to, given my muse's rarity of

appearances and her apparent reluctance to fulfill her responsibilities in my case. Which is why I so sincerely exhort your support and assistance, as I have asked for this kind of thing from other writers with connections at the publisher, to little avail, and I'm running out of contacts. Which may illuminate, in some small measure, my continuing to solicit your aid even though no trace of you remains, other than your writing, which, to be honest, I don't fully understand, although there is plenty of it, and I do have some good years left in which to make further efforts in that direction. I shall, with your permission, although now I realize sadly that it cannot be explicitly forthcoming, inform Mrs. E. of your support, however posthumous, and with luck it will add to a groundswell of influence that might silence her remonstrations once and for all.

Thank you again for all you have done, and wishing you all the best in the afterlife, where no doubt, and I certainly hope, there is a total absence of editors and of those who think they know better how language should be put to the service of Fine Art than the Artists Ourselves.

Sincerely yours,

J. C., author



Dear Mrs. E.,

Hi! How are you? Fine, I hope. It's been days since my manuscript arrived at your lovely office, probably. So looking forward to your feedback, always a huge contribution to the effectiveness of a piece. You have an uncanny eye (ear? ha ha).

Just wondering if my book was accepted for publication. I hope you recall how long I have been working on this, and it's very important to me. Please don't feel rushed or pressured.

Thanks for all the indefatigable and invaluable assistance, and have a terrific weekend!

Your obedient servant,

J. C., XOX! PS. You should be a writer!



Dear Sir or Madam,

Thank you for your submission of: manuscript.

The editorial department regrets that we have no place for your material at this time.

Signed,

D. L., Intern #14

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