

## PW TALKS WITH SUSAN BELL

## Writer, Edit Thyself

A writer's work isn't done when the last word is written, says Susan Bell. In *The Artful Edit* (Reviews, June 18), she tells writers how to see their own work afresh and read it with an editor's eye.

**Is self-editing just another term for rewriting, or is it an entirely different process?**

Rewriting is limited to taking your pen and literally writing again. Self-editing includes the reading of the work, which is the essential part of editing for me. To edit well we need to read well.

**Isn't self-editing a little like trying to perform surgery on your own brain?**

That's why I included a whole chapter on gaining perspective. It's so difficult to have any objectivity on your own work. Self-editing is about trying split yourself into two people: the person who wrote the book and the stranger who is coming to read it.

**You suggest reading out loud to someone else as a way to hear it anew, but isn't sharing a work-in-process problematic?**

The value of reading out loud is not to get a response from someone else. It is to hear the text in a voice that is different from your interior voice. We are not used to listening to ourselves talk. It's about finding a way to hear what you've written in as neutral a way as possible.

**You point to F. Scott Fitzgerald as the consummate self-editor. Still, would *The Great Gatsby* have been *The Great Gatsby* without the benefit of his editor, Max Perkins?**

No, but I did not write this book to say editors are not necessary. It's really important for that to be understood. I'm suggesting writers can and should take more responsibility for their own work before they get to an editor.

**Did being a professional editor make writing your book easier or harder?**

At the beginning I had to detox myself from my habit of keeping pencil in my hand and editing all the time. I kept thinking I should make every sentence perfect. You can keep yourself from writing freely if you edit too soon and too manically.

**As an editor, have you ever received a book that didn't need editing?**

I did. It was *The Angel Carver* by Rosanne Daryl Thomas. I didn't touch that book except to tell her there were three words she might change.

—Marylyn Donahue



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