

## FOR LOVE OF REVISIONS

By Craig Lancaster

I just spent an intimate week with the novel -- tentative title THE SUMMER SON -- that I finished back in August.

Except I wasn't really finished. Hence, the intimate week.

While I waited to decide what I want to do with it, and waited for others to decide what they want to do with it, I decided to take a fresh run at the manuscript, to see what perspective a few months' distance would give me.

This brings me to a concession: I love editing and revising. I love it more than I love writing a first or second draft. Drafts fill me with anxiety. Without really meaning to, I write quickly as I try to transfer what's in my head to the computer screen, even as story threads blow up and transform and head in new directions. I tend to work at a breakneck pace -- not so much because I enjoy it, but because my head and my fingers compel me to.

Ah, but revisions. Revisions are a love affair in full bloom. I sit with a printout, red pen in hand, and I bleed on the pages. I strike extraneous words. I banish entire stretches of exposition. I zero in on the tell and turn it into show. I move pieces of the story around. I discover new motivations for characters major and minor, and I flesh those out. The word count drops precipitously on one page, then rises by a few hundred on the next few. With a draft, I see my story at a distance. With revisions, I see it up close -- the flaws, yes, but also the beautiful moments. I try to excise the former and amplify the latter.

As I made my way through THE SUMMER SON, I drew a bead on an irritating tendency that pervaded the novel. The story, in the voice of the protagonist, Mitch Quillen, was polluted by constructions like this:

*"I could hear them ..."*

*"I could see it ..."*

*"I could feel the fear ..."*

Out came the red pen, and my sentences went on a diet:

*"I heard them ..."*

*"I saw it ..."*

*"I felt the fear ..."*

At a crucial emotional juncture, I simply shook my head at how lazy and expository I'd become. As young Mitch lies in bed and listens to a fight from the room next door, I described it this way:

*Marie hated life alone on the ranch, hated life out in the field with Dad, wanted something new, something better, something more fitting her station, or what she believed her station to be.*

*Dad laid out his discontent, too. He had no tolerance for Marie's spendthrift ways, her meddling in business matters, her wandering eye. I gathered that Dad had found her in Billings – making his day of driving very nearly a thousand miles. She was at a nightclub, in the arms of another man. There had been confrontations, first Dad against the interloper, and then Dad against Marie all the way back here.*

*He called her a whore again. She said she had done nothing he hadn't done first, which was true, although I don't know if she had proof or was just scattershooting accusations in hopes of a hit.*

By the time my red pen was finished, it looked like this:

*The words were quieter now, delivered in low tones so as not to rouse me. It was a senseless consideration. I lay in the dark, my eyes open, and took in every syllable.*

*"I hate it here," she said. "I hate being with you out there. I deserve better."*

*"This is the deal," Dad said. "You knew it when you married me."*

*"I didn't know it would be like this."*

*"That makes two of us."*

*"What do you mean?"*

*"I can't keep up with you, Marie. You're bleeding us dry, you're out gallivanting around. I come home and find you in Billings –"*

*“I was just having fun.”*

*“It looked fun, you and that guy.”*

*“He’s just a friend. Not that you’d know –”*

*“He was friendly, that was clear. He can be friendly with a busted nose.”*

*“Oh, yeah, big man Jim. You can’t understand it, so you’ve got to hurt it.”*

*“Whore.”*

*“I didn’t do anything that you didn’t do first.”*

*“Lying whore.”*

*I turned over, wrapped the pillow around my head and said a silent prayer that it would end soon. It seemed to me, lying there in the dark, that Jerry had made the only sensible decision.*

*He had gotten out.*

When I see the difference, I'm thankful for revising. Every writer works differently, and the trick for all of us is figuring out the way that best suits us. For me, learning to love editing and revision allows me to see the greatest possibility for my work.

Oh, and if you're wondering what happens to Mitch, here's my advice: Stay tuned.

(How about that? In revising, I managed to write in a cliffhanger!)