

HIDDEN MEANINGS: CREATIVE FICTION, NON-FICTION, AND FACTS

SESSION FIVE—TRANSCRIPT

Rob Spillman Craft Talk
Transcript

Rob: My name is Rob Spillman, I'm the editor of Tin House Magazine, and I have been editing it for eighteen years now. I started it in '98, first issue came out in 1999. So, I am a professional editor, I get about 20,000 submissions a year and I also teach a course at Columbia University's MFA program called "Establishing Authority" where I talk about kind of what works and what doesn't work in 300 words or less. I should be considered an expert but then I started writing my own book and realized how little I know about my own work and what editing is actually really like, to edit yourself. So, I was going to talk a little bit about the process of writing my own book and how that changed my attitude a little bit towards editing and sort of the nuts and bolts of that. So, it took me ten years to write "All Tomorrow's Parties." The first 7 years I kind of was really struggling with kind of excavating material, interrogating myself, which I think is necessary for any piece as I try to find the heart of the piece and failing formally. I thought being an editor that I would be able to really quickly find a form that worked for me. But I realized pretty quickly that even though I do this for a living, you really do have to, you actually have to, there are really no shortcuts, you actually do have to lay the groundwork and really put the, put in share time. Even though you are failing most of the time. And my goal got to be to fail better and to just keep excavating the material. And about seven years in, I found the form that worked for me. For me, that was alternating chapters, and I was able to play with time with that and manipulate time and sort of everything followed with that. It was still three years of hard work, of working within that form that things currently came more easily. So, when I was editing myself, I kind of knew as a professional editor, I knew what to look for. Does it move the story forward? You know, you have to apply fictive tools to memoir and you have to think of it as a story because it is a story, it is a narrative. And a book that was really helpful for me was Vivian Gornick "The Situation and the Story" where she talks about separating out your situation, which is your raw material, but what is the story of that situation. And that really helped me to look at my own work, you know, how does this move the story forward? Is this actually propelling the narrative? And no matter how closely attached you are to the material, you really have to look at it as a tool. It also helped me clarify where I was writing from, so that's a challenge in memoirs that the goalposts are always moving, like every day you wake up and you acknowledge, you can continually be adding material. So, I had to cut off at the age of 25 and that's kind of limited my viewpoint and I had to edit from the point of view of like, is this within the timeframe I'm thinking about? And also, does it move the story forward? So, then I got to the point where I was being edited. And that completely blew me away. My experience has been that the better the writer, the more amenable they are to edits. So that doesn't mean that they're going to take what I suggest. They will notice that there's a problem. So then you know, I'll make a mark and I'll suggest something and the better the writer, the more likely they are to disregard my suggestion but to re-write it in their own way. So they will see that there's a problem and they'll do that. So when I got my first round back from my editor it was completely covered in red marks and I had this existential crisis that all people who are being edited have. And I've dished this out, it's like "oh my god I'm a total failure, why did I think I could write?" What an editor is doing is suggesting, making suggestions and also pointing out any possible questions. So, does this move the story forward? Did you mean this? And surprising to me was, "here's some connections that you missed. You did not put these things together," which made me realize it's so hard to see your own work. I'd been working on this book for ten years and I couldn't see these connections. It also gave me the permission to cut things that were really personally close to me but that an outside editor would look at and go "No, does this chapter move the story forward?" and it's like "But I was eight years old and it meant so much to me," and she was like, "Yeah, and? What does this have to do with the story?" So I was cutting and then, being an editor,

HIDDEN MEANINGS: CREATIVE FICTION, NON-FICTION, AND FACTS

and I also run a literary festival, Tin House Literary Festival during the summer and I sit in on all the lectures and last summer when I had already been through a couple of edits, Marlon James gave this amazing talk about self-editing and getting down to the last things, which was actually really really helpful for me because I had already been through several edits. But he made me really get each line and think about each line and also I started doing, the great thing about technology is you can do universal searches, so I started doing universal searches for things like all “ly” words. So, I went through all 400 pages and if it had an “ly” at the end and I looked at the word and 99.9% of them went, there’s just no justification for most “ly” words. I also searched for any kind of qualifier: “Just,” “some,” you know any word like that, I universal search and usually search and destroy. Got rid of them all and so I kept doing more and more searches and by doing these universal searches, you’re not reading them in kind of rhythm, but they sound good or they make sense, but when you look at them on their own, you can just be ruthless about your cuts. So, I got really really good at that. That was a surprising lesson, but one that technology has made really easy to do and I sort of kept going deeper and deeper. And I edited and self-edited up through final page proofs in January, it’s now April, so to the last possible minute I’m still refining and trying to fail as best I could. That was my goal was to be, you know, no work is perfect and I just wanted to fail as best I could. I’m trying to think if there are any other...self-editing things that I did. Those are the major lessons. Things come to mind that I could talk about that I did not talk about?

Interviewer: Yeah absolutely, are there particular questions you were asked by your editor that you’ve never really asked other writers that you’ve been looking at? Did the process of being edited help bring up other different approaches?

Rob: Yeah, my editors were pretty ruthless, but I think I’m fairly ruthless. One thing it did do was made me more empathetic to writers. I feel like I already am empathetic, but it made me empathetic to the realization that they are blind to their own material sometimes. Especially the more personal material, the more blind you are to it. Being able to, part of editing is really being able to ruthlessly look at your own work and really coldly look at it and say “Does this move the narrative forward?” And that’s such a hard thing and especially how personal it is. So when you’re saying “Oh just cut this scene,” you’re saying “Oh cut this portion of your life out,” so it’s a hard thing to do and that’s made me more empathetic. That was one of the major revelations of going through this.

Interviewer: Did being edited change your writing or crafting process more so, or your revision process more so?

Rob: I just went through so many drafts. But I got to the point where after I had already been through two major revisions that I felt that it was too worked over in a way, so I actually, after it had been edited a couple times, I actually rewrote the whole thing, like beginning to end, each line, just so it would feel fresh. I incorporated the edits, but the language felt literally dead to me, and so it had to inject the life back in. There are several analogies I use, and one of them is that when you’re first writing, you have all this scaffolding that holds it in place and part of editing is taking off the scaffolding and trusting your reader that they’re going to be co-creators of this world with you. And then you also have to do internal structures and make sure it holds up. And when you’re doing all this patchwork some of that energy from the first draft kind of gets lost and you have to go back and put the energy back in. And try to create that balance of like, it makes sense and it flows but it also has that energy of creation that you want. So It feels effortless but there’s a lot of underlying work on it.

HIDDEN MEANINGS: CREATIVE FICTION, NON-FICTION, AND FACTS

Interviewer: So I think you mentioned two really great tips for or methods of the universal searching for what we call “ticks” or something for the qualifiers. Are there other particular methods or tools that you think maybe beginning writers could use?

Rob: Yeah, I think I did this on all drafts was read your work out loud. I think that is essential in no matter what you’re writing is read your work out loud. Because when you’re reading on the page with your brain you’re reading one way. You’re reading quickly. It all makes sense, but when you’re reading out loud, you’re reading it viscerally and your body has this amazing BS-detector where it just, you start rushing through something or you just feel that it’s a false or lofty thing. Or you stumble over the language, the music of the language, that’s a big one. You just can’t fake reading that out loud when you just get into an awkward phrase that feels like you’ve got a refrigerator tied to your back and you’re falling down the stairs, you can’t make that sound good. So, I read all drafts out loud and just made corrections based on the sound of things and the logic of things and the music of things. I can tell when I get drafts of something that the person hasn’t read it out loud because there’s just some clunky, like if you read that out loud, there’s no way you’d send that to me.

Interviewer: This might be sort of a two part question. One, how did you first get into editing? And two, because we work with a lot of younger and beginning writers, I think they’re often hesitant to give feedback to one another’s work, to workshop they feel like “what do I have to offer?” Do you have any advice for those writers too?

Rob: Yeah, I’m pretty much an autodidact, I’ve taken one English class in college, that was it. I ran track in college and got a psychology degree and went to graduate school for sports psychology and exercise physiology. But in college I worked at a used bookstore in Baltimore called the Kelmscott Bookstore and that’s where I actually got my education. So, I was kind of a voracious reader first and last. So, I’ve learned by doing and by just talking about it and I think if you are a voracious reader, you have something to say. You may not have the technical language to say exactly what’s going on in technical terms, but you know when a story is working or not working. If there’s simple things like good mystery versus bad mystery. Good mystery is “will he use the gun? Or what are the social mores in Russia as Napoleon is invading during ‘War and Peace?’” You know bad mystery is “there are 17 characters here and I have no idea who any of them are and I don’t care about any of them because there’s no attachment at all.” And you don’t need technical language to describe that kind of thing, so I think everybody has, if you are first and foremost a reader, you have, you are there for a critic and an editor. You have, you know what you like and don’t like. And so, I got into it by doing. When I moved to New York I got an entry level job at Random House in the publicity department actually and worked there for a year and long enough to realize that I wasn’t good at publicity because I couldn’t manufacture enthusiasm for things I wasn’t enthusiastic for, but I figured out how publishing works and started writing for people. I learned by doing, by making my deadlines and that sort of apprenticeship.

Interviewer: Anything, oh, you talked a little bit about failing formally when you’re starting out. I wonder if you could just talk a little more about that.

Rob: Yeah, I just try to write the book chronologically from my upbringing in Berlin to going back to Berlin. It was just straight chronological and it felt flat to me. There wasn’t, by the time you got to Berlin when the wall came down, I was bored with myself. Even though I had had an exciting childhood, I just, it just felt like, I was reading “and then this happened and then that happened,” I wasn’t bringing art into it somehow, it didn’t feel creative to me, it just felt kind of dead on the page. I

HIDDEN MEANINGS: CREATIVE FICTION, NON-FICTION, AND FACTS

was just trying to figure out ways to mix it up and moving time around, but it didn't work. So, I finally tried alternating chapters, and when that happened, just sort of everything clicked into place. I think it was a combination of that formal, moving the formal stuff but also having worked on the material for seven years, figured out that stuff, so a lot of, either writing technique or editing yourself is like really interrogating your characters. Even in non-fiction you have to interrogate your characters, you have to be empathetic to your characters, and you have to be empathetic to yourself as a character, so I had to interrogate my 14-year-old self and say "What was going on with you at that time? What was going on around you?" and look at other people and how other people were looking at me as an angry 14-year-old. Which is hard to do because you have these core stories that you hold onto and your core feelings, like you'll always feel like that enraged, confused 14-year-old, but let's actually look at that 14-year-old and look at his poor mother. What she was going through and what it was like to be a friend of that jerk? And that difficult person, so you have to step out of, and that's kind of editing your life too, which is part of editing.

Interviewer: I think the last question I'll ask is about, you talked a lot about "does it move the story forward?" Are there particular craft elements that really service that or that really, maybe that writers can look out for, or how can they test that?

Rob:

Kurt Vonnegut has this great line, "every character should want something even if it's a glass of water." And that's one of my favorite pieces of advice because if a character doesn't want something then you're like "Why am I reading all about this kid's backstory?" But if the kid is really dehydrated and dying of thirst and trying to cross the playground, you know, you're going to read about his history of everybody on that playground because the poor kid is about to faint. And you keep referring to the water. So on the surface level there has to be something that's pulling you forward, so there has to be glass of water after glass of water. So the bigger themes of "what is it like to be alive in the 20th century?" or whatever it is, "what are the social mores of Russia in the 1800s?" you're willing to do that versus these things that pull you through it. Another analogy I like is that your entire book or essay or story, imagine a taut string that's going through the entire thing, it's got a taut string and everything has to contribute to the tautness of the string. So, if it doesn't, if it's going off of it, it's going to make the whole thing slack and the whole thing kind of collapse. If it doesn't feel taut, and it isn't hitting your themes or pushing your themes forward, it's gotta go sadly.