

Interview with Tom Hyman

During the time Ivan was writing *Eye of the Moon*, I was reading the chapters as they came out of the printer. When Ivan had completed three, he would send them to Tom. Tom and I shared the adventure of this novel developing bit by bit, and we had this unspoken agreement of letting the story develop without interference. It was a wild ride, and we both acted as good motorcycle passengers, moving with the flow of the author. Tom's guidance was spot-on. I have tremendous respect and affection for this consummate professional.

How is editing a new writer different from editing an already experienced author?

Experienced authors tend to take editing and suggestions in stride much more easily. They know how the game works and have a more realistic view of the quality of their work and the possibility that it can be improved. They recognize, from previous experiences, that input from a good editor can actually make their writing better. All writers tend to be insecure to some degree, but new writers are especially prone to fits of insecurity, depression, or paranoia. Initial reactions to a substantial edit can range from pathetically grateful to completely outraged. I've seen it all. During my many years as both a magazine and book editor in New York, I've had male writers yell and threaten me, and female writers break down in tears. (I've also had females yell at me and men break down in tears.) But most of the time writers are eager for reaction and encouragement (and praise) and actually take constructive criticism pretty well.

As an editor, what are the main things you look for in a piece of writing?

If it's fiction, I look for the story. If it's not a good story, nothing can save it. The best writing in the world won't save it. If it's a good story, but not well written, the writing can be fixed and it can be saved. If it's a good story, and it's well told, then you've found gold.

What makes a really good editor in your opinion?

A good editor should be sensitive to the style of the writer and be able to suggest changes that don't violate that style. A good editor should also be someone who can crawl inside the writer's work and see it from the writer's point of view as well as his own.

If there is one piece of advice to a writer that you feel is most important, what would it be?

You must be persistent. It typically takes a long time to establish oneself. And while your muse is usually out on a date with someone else, you never seem to be able to get rid of that stay-at-home 600-pound critic called Failure in your room, looking over your shoulder and shaking its head. Many potentially successful writers probably failed because they gave up too soon.

What do you think is the most important piece of advice to your fellow editors?

Be critical but be constructive. Criticism has to be positive, not negative. You're not a reviewer; you're an editor. If there's something amiss with a piece of writing, you need to be able to show the writer what's wrong and why and how to fix it. A great editor can usually do this, and do it in a way that the writer understands and appreciates.

Do editors hang together at all? What do you discuss?

At publishing houses they do. And in my experience we talk about everything except editing. (When bankers get together they talk about art. When artists get together they talk about money.)

How do you consider one becomes a truly great editor?

Tough question. A lot of the process is probably accidental. Some of the great editors I have known were failed writers. They had talent and understood the principles of good storytelling, but lacked the adequate creative imagination. So for them editing was the next best thing. Even if they could not create a great story from scratch, editing gave them a rewarding role in the creative process.

What can you tell us about editing *Eye of the Moon* and working with Ivan?

I was great fun because Ivan had a vastly entertaining and insightful story to tell, and the process of the novel unfolded in an unusual seat-of-the-pants fashion. For me, there was considerable suspense not only in the novel itself, but also in the actual process of Ivan's writing it. For many months I had no idea where the story was headed (and I guess Ivan wasn't too sure about that, either) and if he would ever finish it. So I was naturally on tenterhooks about whether or not it was ultimately going to work. And if it didn't, would he be able to fix it? And would I be able to help him fix it? Fortunately Ivan battled his way down that very long, winding, treacherous creative path with considerable creative agility and determination, and emerged at the finish a winner. I may have helped him out of a pothole or two along the way, but I found my role mostly that of a cheerleader, encouraging him on.

You are a writer, a writing teacher, a scriptwriter, and an editor, all of these on a professional level. Which one do you enjoy the most today?

I retired from writing fiction quite a few years ago and enjoy sharing as an editor what I learned along the way with others these days, but thinking back on all the roles I've played nothing ever beat being a novelist.

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Read more about Tom Hyman in Ivan Obolensky's interview with him, [Part I](#) and [Part II](#).