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The Author's Gauntlets: The Writing, Editing, and Publishing Process of a Novel

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Robert Clifton

Honors Capstone Project

June 1, 2022

The Author's Gauntlets: The Writing, Editing, and Publishing Process of a Novel

Intro

Hello! Thank you all for coming to my presentation. So, many people have done presentations about novels or stories they've written, and hearing about their writing process is always fascinating to me. But if you're serious about getting your story out into the world, like I am, the writing process is only the first step. In this presentation, I aim to do a quick crash course of the *entire* process of novel creation, from conception to publication.

But first, a little bit about myself. At my elementary school, we had this thing called Young Authors every year. Every student would write and illustrate their own short story, and then we had a big festival with everyone's parents where we all read our stories. Maybe that sounds terrifying to some of you, but the first time I did it, I absolutely loved it, from the writing to the illustrating to the presenting. It wasn't until fifth grade that I came to the realization, "I want to do this for a living." And I've been working towards that dream ever since. I've had hundreds of story ideas over the years, but none of them have made it beyond my initial planning stages. Until now.

Flite of the Jon Quimbys is about a young man named Jon Quimby and his varied and complex relationships with his grandfather, his father, and his best friend Carson Landry. Oh, and of course his grandfather's old car. Here's a brief summary: "Jonathan Newberry Quimby III has been estranged from his family for seven years. But when he coincidentally finds his grandfather's 1957 DeSoto Fireflite languishing in a junkyard, he sees a path to redemption. He

buys it to fix up and present to his grandpa as the ultimate gift. But Jon's timeline is suddenly accelerated when he learns his grandpa's health has taken a turn for the worse. In a panic, Jon recruits his mechanic friend Carson for tech support, and the two embark on a cross-country road trip in the broken-down car to deliver it to Jon Sr. before it's too late."

Hopefully you're all intrigued by now. If not, my future career as a writer is in serious jeopardy. In any case, now that you have a basic idea of what I'll be talking about, I can tell you all about how I wrote this, starting with the story of how this story came to be.

The Writing Process

For writers, it's very rare that an idea just pops into our heads randomly. There are countless thoughts, memories, and other influences that go into an initial conception, and so it is with *Flite of the Jon Quimbys*, or *FOTJQ*, as I'll be referring to it from now on. To understand the origin of this story, we'll need to go way back in my history.

So, besides being an aspiring writer, I'm also a classic car aficionado, as you may have guessed. That all started with my grandfather's old car, a 1963 Chevy Nova convertible. I never knew my grandfather very well: he died when I was three. But after he passed away, my mom bought his car from my grandmother, and it's been in our garage ever since. We'd take it out to drive about once a year, making it a consistent presence in my young life.

"But Robert," I hear you say, "that car doesn't look anything like the one in your story. Where'd the Fireflite come from?" Well, my patient friends, I'm getting to that. So, fast-forward ten years to seventh grade. On a whim, I wanted to learn more about classic cars, and since I still believed in research via books at that age, I went looking in my

school's library for books about the subject. And I found one. This one, in fact (*Classic American Cars* by Quentin Willson). And as I was flipping through it, I came across this car: the 1957 Chrysler New Yorker. Almost as soon as I saw it, I thought, "Wow. That is the most beautiful car I've ever seen."

In my subsequent research, I learned that in the 1950s, Chrysler, along with Plymouth, Dodge, DeSoto, and Imperial, were all under the Chrysler corporate umbrella. And in the late 1950s, Chrysler Corp. had a design program called the Forward Look, headed by this man, Virgil Exner. Exner designed the cars for all the Chrysler makes in this period, and he pushed the company towards the sleek, dartlike shapes with large tailfins that, to us, define the aesthetic of the late 1950s. For a while, Chrysler was the envy of the automotive world, at least styling-wise. I promise, this is all relevant to my story-making process.

So clearly, I wasn't alone in thinking the New Yorker was the most beautiful car I'd ever seen. And almost immediately, I decided I must have it. I took the book home and showed it to my parents. When I said I wanted the car, they said it was cool and just kinda laughed me off, understandably so. But it became a legit obsession of mine. I read the entry in the book over and over, I printed out pictures and stuck them to my walls and my door, I combed the annals of the internet to find any that were for sale.

After a while though, I reluctantly accepted that getting a classic car was a pretty far-out goal for a seventh grader. So, as an outlet for my obsession, I turned to the only classic car that I could work on: my grandpa's '63 Nova. And as I cleaned and polished it inside and out, I noticed things about it; things I'd seen before but hadn't paid much mind to. While the car was under my grandfather's care, he modified it extensively, putting in

things like a tape player and his own speaker system, and cupholders that don't work. He also made little quick fixes all over the car, like a bunch of hastily patched rust holes, duct tape over ripped-up seats, and carpet haphazardly shoved into the cab. Those little traces of him are everywhere on that car, and in the last few years, I started to look at them and wonder, what don't I know about my grandfather; what are the stories of his that I haven't heard? Out of that question, I created a concept for a short story where a young man fixes up his grandfather's old car, and his grandpa tells him stories about it.

Fast forward again from seventh grade, and it's Winter Break of my junior year here at Western. I'm at home with my family. My obsession with the Chrysler has cycled in and out over the years, so just for fun, I decide to go online and see what's for sale. And lo and behold, I come across the Holy Grail: a 1957 Chrysler New Yorker in the exact shade of blue I wanted, in good condition, for not too outrageous a price. I decided the time was now: if I didn't get this one, another one like it may not pop up ever again. So, I went all out: I made a full-on persuasive PowerPoint for my parents on why we should get this car, and I must have done a good job, because they agreed! And after a few more months, this car, yes, the one I used as an example earlier, made its home in our driveway. Her name is Belle, and she's my pride and joy.

A few months later, I was still reeling from the achievement of my 8-year dream. At the same time, I was in a publishing class, taught by the magnificent Lee Gulyas, who also advised this project! Our final project for that class was to write a proposal for a book idea we had. I was originally developing another idea, but suddenly, that short story about the young man and his grandpa's car popped into my head again, and then I thought, "What if it was also a road trip?" And lo, the concept for *FOTJQ* was born.

Having the project for the class was great, because I now have materials I'll need later in the publishing process! But I'll get back to that. From that genesis, I took some time to let the idea develop. Truly, my favorite experience as a storyteller is when you come up with an idea and it's like your own little Big Bang, where all the details, story beats, character arcs, and other elements just spontaneously generate and fall into place. I have a whole document full of ideas I had for *FOTJQ*, many of which didn't make it into the final product. But that's okay: this first stage is all about idea generation. As an example, one of the first decisions I had to make was what kind of car I would feature in the story. I had two great bases, in my grandpa's '63 Nova or my own '57 New Yorker. I really wanted it to be the New Yorker, but something held me back from that. You see, I wanted to portray the grandpa in the story as a fairly middle-class man, not poor by any means, but not rich either. Chrysler Corp. had a rigid hierarchy with its makes at the time, with the budget Plymouths at the bottom, going all the way up to the super-luxury Imperials at the top. Chryslers at the time were just one step below the top; they were luxury cars. But I quickly realized there was an easy solution to this: right below Chrysler, in the middle of the hierarchy, was DeSoto, which looks very similar to the Chrysler, but would have been middle-class at the time. So, in my head, I had my New Yorker and my grandpa's Nova do a little fusion dance, and out popped this, a 1957 DeSoto Fireflite in white and green, which I named Bonnie in the story. Plus, the name Fireflite gave me the idea for the title!

So, once I had all those details worked out and we got into summer, I was ready to start writing. And I really didn't want this to become just another story-building document on my computer; I wanted to keep my momentum. And I had a plan.

How many of you know what NaNoWriMo is? For those who don't know, it's short for National Novel Writing Month, and it's an online event where people challenge themselves to write a 50,000-word rough draft of a novel in 30 days. It normally happens in November, but they also do events in April and July. I planned to participate in the July one, and I told everyone I could that I was doing it, so I couldn't back out. For some perspective on how big 50,000 words is, that goal required me to write about 1,700 words every day of the month. So far in this presentation, I have spoken just over 1,900 words. Yeah. It's big.

So why do it this way? Well, my two biggest problems when I try to write something are not setting goals for myself and my inner editor. I don't often set goals or deadlines for myself, and when I do, I'm inevitably very forgiving, so the goal or deadline ends up being moot. Not that being forgiving of yourself is bad, but it's not helpful when you want to buckle down and do something. As for my inner editor, it usually slows me way down. Whenever I write, I start thinking, "Oh, I should change this word," or "Oh, I should rewrite this passage," and then it takes me forever to write a single page. But the whole point of NaNoWriMo is quantity over quality; the word goals and time constraint force you to just write and write and not think about editing. So, it was good that the NaNoWriMo system was forcing me to confront and overcome my biggest hindrances.

All through July of last year, I did my best to reach the goal of about 1,700 words each day. The website helpfully gives you graphs to show you how you're doing with your word goals. This one shows you how you're progressing through the month, and this one shows you your word count from each day. As you can see, I stayed consistently on

the recommended gray line here, but my word count varied wildly from day to day. And that's okay! I was working a part-time job while writing this thing and working on it during my lunch breaks and at nights before I went to bed. There were days when I had a lot going on and could barely manage 500 words, and days when I had a real wind going and did nearly 3,000 words. Over 3,000 on this day. The point is, it's okay if you don't make your writing goal one day; chances are you can make it up the next. What you don't want to do is miss your writing goal multiple days in a row and leave it all to the end of the month. I think I probably would've had a heart attack if I did that. But I did it! I made it to July 31st and ended up with 50,093 words.

But here's the thing: the novel wasn't finished yet. I was only about halfway through the story! So I knew I would have to keep going, and I wanted to keep my momentum from NaNoWriMo. I gave myself a few days' break at the beginning of August, and then I set another goal. On the website, you can set any goal for yourself at any time; it doesn't have to be during an event, and it doesn't have to be 50,000 words. NaNoWriMo really is a fantastic tool for anyone who wants to write anything, just for how it helps keep you accountable and keep track of your progress. But anyway, with this first one, I gave myself a week to write 10,000 more words. I was intending to go 10,000 by 10,000, which is why this is called Step by Step 1. But I quickly found that I was more burnt out than I thought from July, and I couldn't keep up the 1,700-word-a-day pace anymore. Instead, I hovered around 1,000 a day. So I decided to go with that pace, and gave myself another month to write 20,000 words. But I still wasn't done by then, so I gave myself another week for another 4,700 words, which still didn't cut it. So then, I gave up on setting a specific goal and just kept going until I was done. And yes, I was

able to keep myself on track without the motivation of a NaNoWriMo goal; it only took me two months of practice. And I went about 20,000 more words, and then added it to my NaNoWriMo count in this last goal called Screw It, Here's the Rest. At the end, I ended up with a 106,695-word rough draft of my novel, which is about 183 8.5x11 pages: a proper-sized novel. And yes, I was, and still am, very proud of myself.

The Editing Process

But like I said earlier, the writing process is just the first step in creating a novel. Next up is the editing process. The very first thing I wanted to do here was elicit feedback, so I sent the raw, unedited NaNoWriMo draft to three of my closest friends who know writing stuff. I call them my Alpha Readers. I left it to their mercy, and then I did not touch *Flite of the Jon Quimbys* for three months. I'm sure you can understand, after working nonstop on this novel from July to October, I was pretty tired of it, so I needed an equal amount of time away from it. That is something I would recommend to any novelist: once you finish your first draft, take a break. If you dive right into editing after you finish, it's more than likely you'll hate it and either tear it apart or give up on it. After you take a break, for however long you feel you need to, you can come back to the draft with fresh eyes and a more optimistic outlook. Which is what I did.

I'd received some of the comments from my Alpha Readers, but not all of them, and I wanted to wait until I had them all before digging into them. So for my first editing pass, I just read all the way through the draft and edited what I thought I needed to. That included a lot of correcting hyphens and contractions I didn't use so I could increase my word count during NaNoWriMo. So that took up a lot of time, but the whole first edit took two to three months on its own, because of how specific I can get with my rewriting.

If you'll recall, my inner editor was a hindrance during the initial writing, but now I could let loose on my manuscript with no mercy. I mostly just took out words and edited paragraphs, but there was one entire sequence near the end that I rewrote. That took a while, but it was fun because I knew I was making the story better. I should also briefly mention that I did my editing on a new document, which I named FOTJQ v2. I would recommend doing that while you're editing, so if you change your mind about an editing decision, you can go back and see the original. At the end of this first pass, I got rid of about 7,400 words for a word count of 99,308 in this version. If you're wondering why the page count increased, it's because I changed it to double-spacing.

By then, I had the comments from all three of my Alpha Readers. I sat down and talked with two of them about their comments, and I'm hoping to talk to the third soon. Talking directly to your readers is a good idea, because you can get a level of insight in person (or over Zoom) that you can't get from written comments. Plus, you can clarify anything they said that confused you. For instance, one of my readers commented "Nice, Jon" after Jon did something that I thought was a nice gesture, but I read it in a sneering tone, like "*Nice, Jon!*" So when I talked with them, I could clarify whether they meant that sincerely or sarcastically. They meant it sincerely.

In any case, I started another document, v2.5, and began incorporating their comments into the draft. It was fascinating and entertaining to see the different personalities of each of my readers come out in their feedback. To vastly oversimplify it, one of my readers is a journalism major, and they made a lot of suggestions for things that could be cut, clarified, or edited down. Another is a theatre major, and they made a lot of comments telling me how they felt at certain moments in the story, which may not

sound useful up front, but was actually crucial because then I could know if I was achieving my desired emotional responses. This editing pass took far less time, and once it was done, I had cut about another 1,000 words, but I'd also added some, for a final word count, as it currently stands, of 98,690.

The Publishing Process

So, for the purposes of this project, and for my future preparation, I've also been getting into the pre-publishing process. I call it pre-publishing because I haven't sent it to anyone yet, but I've still done a lot.

If you're going the traditional publishing route, before you think about sending your book to a publisher, you need an agent. There are a few ways you can find agents. The first place you should look is in the Acknowledgements of your comp titles, where authors often thank their agents. What are comp titles, you ask? It's short for comparable titles, and they are books published in the last three years that are similar to yours, but aren't directly in competition. Here are some of mine (*The Road Trip* by Beth O'Leary; *People We Meet on Vacation* by Emily Henry; *Nowhere for Very Long* by Brianna Madia; *The Wonder Boy of Whistle Stop* by Fannie Flagg). They're important for pitching to publishers later, but they can be very useful here too, because you can find agents who have worked with pieces similar to yours.

Beyond the Acknowledgments of books, there are three other resources I'd like to share. The first is Publisher's Marketplace. This is a general-purpose site for all things publishing: you can find out about book deals, reviews, jobs, publishers, and yes, agents. You can look up any agent you want, and they'll usually have a bio and suggestions on what type of books they're looking to represent, so you can gauge how interested they'll

be in yours. You can also sign up for the Publisher's Lunch newsletter and get weekly updates. The second is AgentQuery, which is like Publisher's Marketplace, but specifically focused on agents. You can search for people just like you would on PM, but you can also search by genre, so you can quickly find an agent that exactly matches your book. Also note: not every agent will be on both platforms, or all the platforms beyond these, so search widely. But make sure you're searching in reputable places; if you just Google literary agents, chances are you'll run across at least a few scam artists posing as agents.

And speaking of scams, the last resource I wanted to talk about is the Authors Guild. They are a fantastic online legal resource for authors, so if you're not sure if you're getting scammed or not, you can ask someone on here! They'll review agent contracts, publishing contracts, or any other legal documentation relating to books you can think of. They'll be more useful when you're actually in talks with an agent, but it's good to be aware of them early on. Final note on these resources: you do have to pay for some of their services, but if you're really serious about getting your writing published, it's worth it.

Once you've assembled a list of agents you like, it's time to start writing query letters. These are your first introduction to an agent, so you want to make sure you stand out. This book, *The Essential Guide to Getting Your Book Published* by Arielle Eckstut and David Henry Sterry, has an excellent section on how to write a query letter, and is just a fantastic read for aspiring authors in general. It talks mostly about non-fiction publishing, but there's some sage advice for fiction writers in there too. We used it in our publishing class. Anyway, you can really make your query letter stand out if you

personalize it to the specific agent you're writing to, so you'll want to look to see if they've worked on any books you like or have read, or if you like any of the same media. In the case of the agent I addressed my first draft to, I saw on their Publisher's Marketplace bio that we liked some of the same movies and TV shows, so I made sure to talk about that in the letter. This helps the agent gauge how well they'll work with you, as well as catching their attention by giving them a small bit of recognition.

You'll also want to include a bio of yourself, specifically relating to the subject in your book if you can. I talked about my interest in classic cars and my relationship with my grandfather in mine. And, most crucially, your pitch for the book. You generally want to have two pitches prepared for your book when you're submitting to publishers and agents: an elevator pitch, which is about a sentence, and a long-form pitch, which is about a paragraph. An elevator pitch for *FOTJQ* could be: "*The Road Trip* by Beth O'Leary, but with friends and family instead of exes." You want to compare your book to others in your elevator pitch, as it should be a quick way for people to understand what your book is about. My long-form pitch, which I actually used in my query letter, is the one I shared with you at the beginning of this presentation. You don't want to make it too plot-heavy, but you want it to be a nice, eye-catching summary of your book. If it's good enough, your publisher may use your long-form pitch as the inside-flap copy! So, with those three elements, you generally want your query letter to no more than a page long. Along with your query, agents will often ask for the first ten pages or so of your manuscript, but check to make sure you know what your agent wants. Thanks again to Professor Gulyas for reviewing my first draft!

So now, you have an agent, you've edited your book with them some more, and you're ready to send your manuscript off to a publisher. You generally have three options for publishers: the Big 5, independent, or self-publishing. I won't be talking about self-publishing; there's nothing wrong with it, but I'm not planning on going that route with *FOTJQ*. The Big 5 publishers are Penguin/Random House, Simon & Schuster, HarperCollins, Macmillan, and Hachette Book Group. They do good work, but they're also very corporate and very hard to get into; they won't take on a book unless they're absolutely sure they'll make a profit on it. So, when the time comes to send out *FOTJQ*, I'll make the case to my agent for pursuing a smaller, independent publisher, like Quirk Books, which published one of my favorite books, *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children*.

When submitting to a publisher, you'll want to prepare a proposal for your manuscript, which is a lot more extensive than submitting to an agent; I will not be doing a full tutorial here. Go read *TEGTGYBP*. There are many aspects that go into a manuscript proposal, including who you envision your audience to be, your bio again, and the specifications for your manuscript, but there are three that I think are most important: comp titles, pitch, and special marketing. I've already talked about pitch and comp titles, but let's touch on comps again for a second: publishers use comp titles to figure out how to sell your book. They can demonstrate what category of literature your book fits in, and who it should be marketed to. When talking about your book to the media and booksellers, comps can also help them understand what kind of book it is. Comp titles are extremely important for publishers, so you want to make sure you choose carefully. When I said they should be similar to but not exactly the same as your book,

what I meant was that they should share some elements of your plot, but not all of them, or they should be presented in a different way. For instance, this book (*Nowhere for Very Long*) has the road trip element, while this one (*The Wonder Boy of Whistle Stop*) has the element of returning to and reconnecting with your past.

But now let's talk about what I consider the most exciting part of writing a proposal: special marketing. If your book features anything that can tie into special, unique marketing tactics, that is a huge advantage. If you want to take your book on tour, this is where you would outline how you want to do that. For *FOTJQ*, I had a lot of fun marketing ideas, nearly all of them revolving around car shows. I think it would be really fun to go on a cross-country book tour to both bookstores and car shows! One of my favorite things about classic cars is their capacity to bring people of all generations together, and *FOTJQ* is a celebration of that. I really feel any marketing campaign for my book would be incomplete without stopping by some car shows. I even thought that for bookstore-only appearances, I could host a contest where people submit their best classic car photos and stories, and the best one gets a free signed copy. As for special places where the book could be sold, car museums and airports would be excellent options. If you can come up with special marketing or selling ideas for your book, you'll stand out to publishers because it shows you know your audience and you're enthusiastic and proactive about your book, meaning you'll probably be great to work with! Online marketing is also a part of this. If you have a large public profile where you can promote your book, or one you can build, that can make the difference between a publisher passing on or buying your work. Again, *TEGTGYBP* goes into great detail about this.

The Future

So, what's in the future for me and my novel? Well, first off, I want to make something clear. I've been talking about writing, editing, and publishing as if they're three separate steps in a sequence. But that's really not true. After you write the first draft, editing may involve cutting and moving stuff around, but it's mostly rewriting. Like I said, I rewrote an entire sequence on my first editing pass. Writing and editing very much occur at the same time. Then, when you get into the publishing process, there's even more editing that goes on, which involves more rewriting. So it's not so much a sequence of steps as it is an ongoing process that gets additional layers added over time.

So I'm definitely going to be doing more editing. I have a lot of ideas for my next draft. My first two editing passes have mostly been about cutting stuff out; getting the story down to the purest, leanest meat. But now, I have lots of fun details, side stories, and recurring elements that I want to add. Because lean meat may be good, but you need more than meat to make a hamburger. The story works perfectly as it is now, but I want to have fun with this story, and I want the readers to have fun with it too.

Once I'm done with that draft, I'll be sending it out to my beta readers, which will be a much larger group of people. Some of you in this room will be beta readers, and I greatly look forward to your thoughts on my story. I'll probably be doing that for the next few years: editing, rewriting, and sending it out for feedback, until I feel like I have a good enough draft to send to an agent. And then, I'll have all the work I've already done to help me with that.

I want to thank everyone who's helped get me here. I want to thank everyone I told about my idea initially, including my parents, my extended family, and my friends,

for putting pressure on me to not just put this thing aside. I want to thank my parents and my coworkers for being supportive of me while I was writing the first draft. I definitely want to thank my three alpha readers for giving me some awesome feedback on my first draft; you guys rock. And I want to thank all my future beta readers for the awesome feedback I'm sure they'll provide. I also want to thank my classmates from English 459: Editing and Publishing for critiquing my initial proposal for this story. I want to thank the Honors College for giving me the opportunity to talk about my crazy story with you all today. And finally, I want to thank Lee Gulyas, for advising me on this project, for giving me great feedback, and for teaching English 459 and inadvertently helping me come up with this idea in the first place. And I hope, someday, you'll all be able to buy *Flite of the Jon Quimbys* off the shelf at your local bookstore. Thank you.