

Adventures in Proofreading

By Donald O. Rickter

Note from the Editor: Don Rickter mentioned to me several months ago that he was busy writing a memoir. I enthusiastically encouraged him to send me excerpts for publication in the Nucleus. This piece is the first of what I hope are many submissions from Don, who has been a key contributor and resource for the Nucleus and its editors for many years.

The story began in Yolo County, CA, when I was a teen-ager. Our major newspaper, The Woodland Daily Democrat, published an annual edition honoring Mexican Independence Day, September 16. At the top of each page were displayed the crossed flags of the US and Mexico — but they were backward. According to the Flag Code, the US flag should have been on its right (the viewer's left). I wrote to the newspaper. My letter was printed, with my nom de plume, Thaddeus Stribling, and an apology from the editor: "Our sharp-eyed reader in Davis is correct."

When I was an undergraduate at UC-Davis, I checked punctuation and spelling for the weekly "Cal Aggie." I was too busy in graduate school and in the Navy to do more.

Years later, while at Polaroid in Cambridge, MA, I volunteered to help with *The Nucleus*. Myke Simon and Arno Heyn were my mentors. Their monthly conferences included detailed grammatical points. I decided to focus on big items, like the masthead for the Febuary (sic) issue. Many people understand the intricacies of English better than I do. The most skilled person I have known was Vivian Walworth. She was amazing as a science writer and editor — and as a human being.

I do what I can't help doing; my eyes spot misspellings in books. I turn the page and an atrocity leaps out at me. This should not happen with spell check and numerous professional proofreaders. Yet it happens. Laurie R. King, author of *The Beekeeper's Apprentice*, has written fourteen books about Sherlock Holmes and his companion, Mary Russell. One book told of their voyage from England to India crossing the Dead Sea.

Of course it was the Red Sea. I wrote the author. She replied soon, with the comment that ten pairs of eyes read the text before publication. We began a penpal relationship when we learned that our mothers were both involved in the repercussions of the San Francisco Fire of 1906.

Most authors of books that sell well do not appreciate my helpful suggestions. An exception is Doris Kearns Goodwin. She has written outstanding books that seem to be

flawless. Deep in the interior of *The Bully Pulpit* is a very embarrassing misprint. When I wrote to Ms. Goodwin she immediately sent a gracious thank you note.

Greg Mortenson, in his *Three Cups of Tea* (2007), surprised me by mis-spelling the Marriott, where he stayed for a period, many times on a few pages.

Two books seem to be free of problems. Senator Elizabeth Warren wrote *A Fighting Chance* (2014) with no obvious flaws in the text, but a photo caption said “we’re dying (sic) Easter eggs.” I was astounded to find J.K. Rowling’s *The Casual Vacancy* (2012) had “dying (sic) her hair jet black” as its only apparent misspelling.

Richard Cohen has at least six serious errors in his fun book about Nora Ephron, *She Made Me Laugh* (2016). He told of Nora’s roots in “Los Angles (sic).”

My latest interaction is with a local Pulitzer Prize winning author, Megan Marshall. Her biography, *Elizabeth Bishop, A Miracle for Breakfast*, is due out on 7 February. I caught a notice on Meg’s website that highlighted the word Brakfast (sic). She generously sent me an autographed copy of the book in January.

My eyes automatically react to unexpected flaws. Newspapers, TV, and the web are problems because errors of content and style are too numerous to deal with. I try to read for pleasure. I am grateful for the authors and editors who dedicate themselves to preserving truth and good stuff.

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