

Red Pencil: Fred Stemme's The Lieutenant's Whistle

BY CINDY VALLAR

Revision, revision, revision

Cindy Vallar analyzes the work behind polished final manuscripts. In this issue, she profiles Fred Stemme's *The Lieutenant's Whistle*.

“Writing a first draft is like groping one’s way into a dark room, or overhearing a faint conversation, or telling a joke whose punchline you’ve forgotten. As someone said, one writes mainly to rewrite, for rewriting and revising are how one’s mind comes to inhabit the material fully.” This quote from Michael Seidman’s *Fiction: The Art and Craft of Writing and Getting Published* (1999) perfectly sums up the writing process. Although a novel is revised many times before its submission to a publisher, revision doesn’t end after a publisher contracts the book. An editor with the publishing company helps the author put the final polish on the manuscript before it becomes a published novel.

Fred Stemme experienced this publishing stage after Amber Quill Press contracted to publish *The Lieutenant's Whistle*. Prior to the United States’ entry into World War I, eighteen-year-old Henry “Hoop” Braddock arrives in France in 1916. The book recounts his experiences as an ambulance driver and the continuation of his career as a newspaper reporter writing accounts of the war from the perspective of the wounded soldiers he encounters. Soon after his arrival, he meets two volunteer nurses, one of whom becomes his sweetheart.

One challenge an author faces is how to make the story more compelling. Perhaps the tweak is small, such as adding a word. For example, in the first paragraph of Fred's early draft, Hoop stops at a canteen to get a doughnut.

Raven and Hoop joined a ribbon of men working their way through the line and came out the other end, each carrying a cup of coffee and a plate holding a doughnut.

This is good description, but specific is preferable to general. In the published version, however, Hoop no longer has just a doughnut. It's now "chocolate frosted". As Fred explains, "I was taught in one of my early writing classes to be specific. Don't write, 'A man ate an apple under the shade of a tree.' Instead say a man ate a Jonathan apple under the shade of a Maple tree.' The reader, hopefully, will taste the tartness of the apple and better picture the tree." Just writing "doughnut" doesn't evoke any response in the reader, but adding "chocolate frosted" might make the reader's mouth water.

Sometimes, the revisions are more substantial. At the canteen, Hoop and Raven meet the volunteer nurses in the French Red Cross. Here's the draft version of the conversation between Hoop and Kyla.

"Huguenot?" Hank guessed.

A surprised look came over her face. "Hoo did ye know?"

"We studied it in school – how the Huguenots were, well, persecuted, I guess you'd call it – Protestants in a land of Catholics. Most of them left France centuries ago and by and large, I believe, most of them became Presbyterians, which is the way I was brought up."

Interesting? Perhaps, but this passage comes across an information dump or

history lesson. A better way to provide this information is to tie it into the characters' backstories. In this case, Fred introduces the fact that Hoop is a minister's son.

"Huguenot?" Hank guessed.

A surprised look came over her face. "How did ye know?"

"We studied it in school – how the Huguenots were, well, persecuted, I guess you'd call it – Protestants in a land of Catholics. They left France centuries ago and, by and large, I believe most of them became Presbyterians, which is the way I was brought up. In fact, my father is a pastor."

"He is? The three sons of my pastor were rowdy."

The other VAD said, "So were ours. E'en his daughter."

Hoop couldn't help but laugh. "Well, I wouldn't say I was rowdy exactly. Maybe a little mischievous, but nothing real bad."

By adding six sentences, the conversation becomes more interesting and reveals personal information about Hoop. When I asked about this change, Fred shared, "I'm a preacher's son so it's somewhat autobiographical. I guess Hoop is my alter ego. A lot of people think minister's children are wild so I thought this would receive confirmation on the part of the reader. Plus, I wanted to interject some humor into the conversation."

Other times, revisions come about because the editor suggests them.

Hoop said, "And you joined because your fiancé is a French soldier? Is that right?"

“’at’s right. Ah’ed already served six months ’n t’ English Red Cross. Mah finance an’ Ah met ’n Bristol whear our family wor on ’oliday. Arnaud, wor ’ead chef at a restaurant ’n ’e came to t’ pier ta buy some fish.” Connie laughed and blushed. “Our family wor ’avin an ice cream treat ’n as Ah wor comin’ out o’ t’ shop Ah bumped into ’im ’n a scoop o’ ice cream fell off t’ cone and hit ’im ’n t’ chest.”

Fred’s editor, EJ Gilmer, made several recommendations concerning this passage. The heavy use of dialect in Connie’s dialogue is hard to read, and she “wanted just a hint of dialect. I was in it to such an extent that I made up dictionaries for several of my characters. To my way of thinking it added flavor and substance to the story. But I admit I got carried away. Even my online class that I took at the time I was doing a final edit thought it was too much and was hard to read. I tapered off a bit and then did so again later, but reached a compromise with my editor so that the dialects were more than just a hint but hopefully did not slow down the reading.”

Another change concerned the first paragraph, which Gilmer felt “looked like ‘filler.’ Connie had just told him, she reminded me, a few paragraphs above that her fiancé was French.” Rather than include repetitious information, “[t]he campaign ribbon is used to tell a little more about Connie and the fact that she had experience.”

Hoop glanced at the campaign ribbon on Connie’s uniform. “How did you get that?”

“I served six months in the English Red Cross. My fiancé and I met in Bristol where our family was on holiday. Arnaud was ’ead chef at a restaurant and ’e came to the pier to buy some fish.” Connie laughed and blushed. “Our family was ’avin’ an ice cream treat and as I was comin’ out

of the shop, I bumped into 'im and a scoop of ice cream fell off the cone and 'it 'im in the chest.”

By toning down the dialect, readers don't have to decipher what the unusual spellings mean. This makes the passage easier to read and maintains the story's flow. A similar change was made to the French dialogue that appears throughout the story. Fred included these passages to add authenticity to the setting and to allow the reader to feel as if s/he were in France. After acquiring their food and beverage, Hoop and Raven search for a place to sit. “Only one bench in the last row showed any available space, and it had room for only one of them – and that would have been a tight squeeze.” That's when Hoop spots the two nurses, one of whom assists them in finding seats.

Hoop could hardly believe their luck. He and Raven headed to the spot, but hesitated.

Seeing the problem, the Scottish nurse gazed down the line of men.

“Pourraient tous d'entre vous squeeese ensemble, s'il vous plaît, faire une petite pièce?”

The line of men stared at her much as they would a goddess. Obediently they squeezed together and the empty space gradually expanded, allowing enough space for both of them.

Although the reader can figure out the meaning of the French words, the phrasing is incorrect. Fred admits his classes at school didn't include French, so “I used Google as my translator. But it isn't always correct. My editor knows French and thankfully corrected my effort.”

Hoop could hardly believe their luck. He and Raven headed to the spot, but hesitated.

Seeing the problem, the Scottish nurse gazed down the line of men.

“Pourriez vous serer vers le haut, s’il vous plait, et faites un peu l’espace.”

The line of men stared at her much as they would a goddess. Obediently, they squeezed together and the empty space gradually expanded until there was enough space for both of them.

An author’s story goes through many revisions before it’s submitted to a publisher. While writing is a solitary occupation, we also consult other writers and beta-readers to get their input on how to improve the story. Since Hoop is a series character, I asked: “What makes Hoop such a compelling protagonist that readers will want to follow him from one story to the next?”

I try to show him as a real person with dreams and flaws and times when he might do something dumb, but all the while dealing with the world around him as best as he can. He definitely is not a super-hero. The war, his romance with Kyla, and the things around him affect him so I try to show his mental state at any given time. I remember a lady in one of my early writing classes when I would read aloud from my novel. She kept asking, “How does he feel?” I had the character doing this, that and the next thing, but was leaving out how he felt. So, now, I routinely ask myself that same question to relate the most important part of the story.

Hoop’s story unfolds through three books, two of which have been published. The trilogy came about after a seminar in European history. “[O]ne of my papers was on the Lost Generation. That paper was later published in *The Lost Generation Journal* along with my poem, “Montparnasse.” Hoop will eventually join the Lost Generation crowd hanging around Parisian Cafes and trying to write a novel, or poetry, or both. By the way, I made Hoop an ambulance driver because Hemingway was not

the only writer to have been an ambulance driver. There was also John Dos Passos as well as others.”

The first book in the trilogy is *Beguiling Dreams*. *The Lieutenant's Whistle* is the second, and I asked Fred how he came up with that title.

The title comes early in the story where Hoop . . . has a folded newspaper on his knee. He picks it up and studies a picture that shows a photo taken in a trench. A Lieutenant is poised with a whistle in one hand and a stop watch in the other. A ladder behind him leans against the parapet. Two soldiers are also in the frame: one is kissing a picture of his sweetheart or his mother while the other one looks like he's saying a prayer.

Quote from the book: At zero hour, when the whistles sounded up and down the line, each man would dutifully climb the ladder in his sector. At the top, upon entering No-Man's Land, a hail of bullets would greet him, and with it, an uncertain fate.

The dead, as much as possible, would be brought back at night. The wounded, too, would be carried back, if they had not been able to crawl back to the trench on their own. From the first-aid stations, to the clearing stations, to the hospitals, a procession of wounded flowed to the rear. It involved medics, doctors, nurses, orderlies and ambulance drivers, some of whom, like Hank, were volunteer drivers in the American Field Service. So, in a sense, the lieutenant's whistle blew for all of them.

Does that picture of the lieutenant actually exist? “Yes, it does exist. I went through a lot of photographs of WWI and that one caught my attention. I told myself that I should save it but I didn't know at that time that's what I'd name the book. Since then I've looked for it and have been unable to come across it. But it stuck in my brain.”

In response to my question about what Fred wanted to share with readers, he wrote, “I don’t try to be flashy. I’m a storyteller. The first sentence of my first *Beguiling Dreams*’ review, the reviewer wrote: “History comes alive!” If that can be said of *The Lieutenant’s Whistle* then I’ve done my job.”

If you would like to learn more about Fred, read excerpts from his books, or learn more about World War I, please visit his website, Hourglass Historicals, at <http://www.hourglasshistoricals.com>.

About the contributor: Cindy Vallar is a columnist, editor, historical novelist, and workshop presenter. Aside from contributions to *Solander* and *HNR*, her work includes *The Scottish Thistle*, a novel of the Rising of 1745, and various articles on maritime piracy that have appeared in *Pirates and Privateers*, *The Pyrate’s Way*, and *No Quarter Given*. You can visit her at www.cindyvallar.com.

___ **Published in** *Historical Novels Review* | [Issue 62, November 2012](#)