

## The Same River Twice

Several months ago, when the decade-old *Hellnotes* was still doing business as a weekly newsletter, before transmogrifying into a blog this May – transblogrifying, I suppose should be the new word – fellow contributor Edo van Belkom fired off a salvo in his monthly column that was aimed squarely between my eyes.

Well, no, it wasn't. It would only feel that way if you were paranoid, and if the doctors are to be believed, really, they're *not* all out to get me. Edo's "Writing 101" installments were full of excellent information and pointers for fledging writers, and often of value to experienced writers, too ... and I just happen to run counter to one of them right down to the twisty double-helix of my being.

This particular installment dealt with writers going back to revise previously published work. Edo's position was unreservedly anti.\* In a nutshell: If your work was good enough to have been published once already, leave well enough alone, get over yourself, and move along. There was a strong implication that any feeling a writer might harbor that he or she had grown in the interim and could do greater justice to the work the second time around is, well, kinda pretentious.

With apologies to none, I've always been one of those who refuse to leave things alone if time and greater objectivity get together and conspire to make me see room for improvement.

Hang around long enough, and editors and publishers start to ask you for reprints. "Free money," I've heard this called, because you've already done the work. All you have to do now is say, "Yes, thanks!"

If only it were that easy. As I've said elsewhere, "Whenever it's time for a story to be collected, or reprinted in anything that comes much later than a year's best roundup, I take another trip through it and almost invariably it sweats off a few more ounces. It serves the story well, I think, and keeps me from feeling as though it's merely been dug out of mothballs."

My tendency to tinker is much more prevalent when it comes to early work, and I would be surprised if that wasn't the pattern with other chronic tweekers. Just as no one emerges from the womb fully formed, writers rarely start out with their voices fully manifested. After what must be a few million published words by now, I'm still working to refine mine.

That voice on the page is a product of evolution, honed through long use and critical self-appraisal. It often requires us to admit that while our works may have been good enough for somebody to publish, nevertheless, our ideas can be better and our ambitions bigger than our means of executing them.

Writers are not all of a single mind when it comes to post-pub revisions, nor should they be. If you feel that a story or a book should remain unchanged, forever reflecting the stage of development you were in at the time ... well, to quote Yul Brynner, “So let it be written. So let it be done.” This is your Way, and it is faultless.

It just ain't mine.

Around the time of Edo's column, I was spending a string of very late nights going through my 1996 novel *Prototype* and, I suppose, daring to imply that I really just might have grown as a writer.

*Prototype* was the last of four novels that came out of what I fondly (well, usually) remember as the Dell/Abyss years, and is slated for a hardcover edition this autumn. I'd salvaged the original computer files from a vintage floppy, which wasn't entirely cooperative, and I needed to go through them to make sure nothing had gone horribly awry inside.

Offhand, I don't recall if I started polishing the text on page 1 ... but close enough. Reading this old work felt as though I were looking at a time capsule peppered with small but frequent sins that I've since tried harder not to commit. At least not as often. And a time or two, even I couldn't figure out what the hell I'd been trying to say.

When the hardcover edition comes out, some readers will be reading it for the first time, and to them it will be entirely new. There's no reason they shouldn't have the best work I can deliver. I wrote the original text to the best of my ability at the time, but my best is better now.

Other readers will be returning to something they liked well enough to read again. They'll find a novel that's no different in content – their memories of it won't be betrayed by characters doing things different this time around – but I hope they're rewarded, even if subliminally, by a familiar novel that's a bit more polished.

Here's what it comes down to: The Dell/Abyss edition represented me in 1996. And the upcoming edition represents me now. One byline, but in a sense, two different writers.

There's an old saying that you can't step into the same river twice. As the water flows endlessly past, the familiar debris is swept away, fresh debris washes down from upstream, and all the while, the river has carved at its banks and resculpted the unseen silt and mud of its bed. It lives under constant renewal.

And so I have a hard time letting a work, especially an early one, wind back into print without wanting it to reflect something of what time and later work have done to whatever skills I may have. It's no better a way than opting to not change what's been set into type already ... just a different one, coming from perhaps a different perspective on what one's creative work represents: a static snapshot from the time and place it was written, or something drawn from a river.

It's why Walt Whitman continued to update *Leaves of Grass* for nearly 40 years, why Stephen King redid the first book in his *Dark Tower* series, why chefs revise recipes until they're perfect, why musicians remaster old recordings when new technology can make them sound truer to life, why George Lucas reworked the original *Star Wars* —

OK, bad example. But you get the idea.

Of course, we could've just scrapped every bit of the foregoing and defaulted to another old saying you may have heard, attributed variously to Jean Cocteau, Paul Valery, and Oscar Wilde, and whose subject alternates between art, poems, and books. Screw it — let's take the broadest one possible:

“Art is never finished, it is merely abandoned.”

Or this one from Robert Cormier, which has its own appeal:

“The beautiful part of writing is that you don't have to get it right the first time, unlike, say, a brain surgeon.”

\* While I wish I could print excerpts rather than summarize, the request to do so went unanswered.