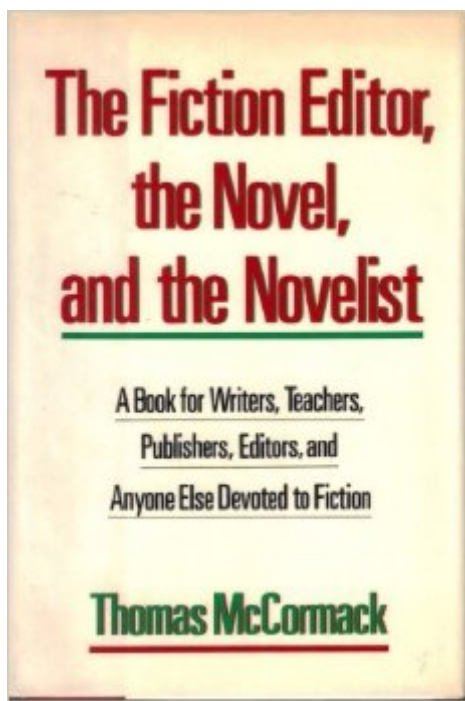


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The Fiction Editor



Synopsis

This book talks about how to plan, write and revise a novel. It describes the sensibility and art required, and it conveys concrete, practical elements of craft. It details how to structure the novel, choose the characters, drive the story, diagnose narrative ailments, and find and apply specific remedies. McCormack is constructive at every level--from individual word choice, up to the over-arching total effect of the novel. Included in full are the author's often-excerpted attack on the notion of "theme" and his innovative analysis of the act of art itself. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

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Customer Reviews

For every published book, there are many editing steps from rough draft to finished product. If math alone were the determining factor, that should mean there would be many more books on editing than on writing. In fact, there are dozens (perhaps hundreds) of books on writing and only a handful on editing. To be sure, there are stylebooks that concentrate on grammatical and punctuational form. And most respectable writers give shelf space to Strunk & White and Zinnser and a few others. But while their efforts address precision of thought and clarity of form, McCormack takes the plunge and talks about artistic sensibility and the effective use of craft in a way that enlarges and energizes like no other book I've run across. His main premise is that artistic sensibility is something innate. We like or dislike something because it strikes a chord within or fails to. This resonant characteristic of art doesn't need to be taught. It is simply there. The purpose of craft is NOT to teach the writer how to hit that mark but to help him diagnose the ailment when he doesn't. A writer

begins with a vision that drives him. The study of craft, at the outset, may hinder more than it helps. When the attempt falls short, there is plenty of time to apply technique and identify the lack or the excess that caused the work to be less than hoped for. McCormack says there are two basic failures--bad things which have crept in and good things which have not. He demystifies the whole spooky process and makes it seem much more manageable and achievable. He also encourages writers to find, cultivate, and appreciate good critiquers whether they be someone in the industry or astute and articulate readers.

There is a lot of really useful information in McCormack's book. In particular, I found two notions to be quite helpful: the notion of "circuitry," which details how one character's motivations and agendas connect with those of others; and the notion of "master effect," the overall impact the author wants to achieve. There were a number of other useful things, too, along the way. However, in general, the book lacks the unity and cohesiveness needed to make it a really effective teaching tool. The first three sections each deal with a different aspect of fiction editing, along with three characteristics of the competent fiction editor: sensibility, craft, and art. In Part One, we are told that sensibility - an intuitive understanding of what will work or not work for readers - is key, yet in Part Three, we are told that sensibility can't be taught. And then, he spends several pages dissecting this unteachable concept of sensibility (why? - if it can't be taught). Likewise, art cannot be taught, he claims, yet in Part Three he analyzes "artful writing" into four distinct stages. On one page McCormack speaks directly to writers, on the next, to editors. He piles metaphor against metaphor, sometimes in the same paragraph, and sometimes spinning out the metaphor at length rather than focusing on how it illuminates editing or writing. He indulges in irrelevant asides on such diverse topics as theatre and philosophy; quotes William Sloane and E. M. Forster without identifying the sources of the quote; and chooses arcane terms with no intuitive appeal - prelibation, gustatory sensibility vs. salivary sensibility (!) - to capture his insights.

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