

non-fiction

ON SPEC – PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

EDITORIAL BY SUSAN MACGREGOR

A thirty-two-year span with *On Spec* magazine gives an editor a lot of history upon which to reflect, both professional and personal. I'm equally concerned and excited about our future.

Back in the Dark Ages, when I began as an *On Spec* editor, writers snail-mailed their paper manuscripts into us at the magazine, enclosing SASE's (self-addressed/stamped envelopes for those of you who have no idea) so they might send their stories elsewhere if we didn't buy their work. Every three months, the stories making up the slush pile were divided into batches, and the batches would be traded between editors. Unlike now, where there are just too many stories for everyone to consider, we read *everything*. We scribbled our notes into notebooks (yes, kids, old school), then with much prodding to finish the batches by the Managing Editor (our current maven, Diane Walton, is our longest standing ME, and long may she reign), we'd meet to discuss the stories we wanted to buy or reject. At those 'Fight Nights', we drank coffee, occasionally wine, we nibbled snacks, and argued for or against the stories. At times, those nights grew contentious.

We didn't always agree on whether a story was good enough for publication, or even if it could be made that way through revision. A good thing then, and it still is now. Differences of opinion lead to a more versatile publication. In hindsight, I must thank my fellow editors for their tolerances of my past smart-assery (is that a word?), as well as their continued friendship and support they offer now. We learned, we survived. All of us cut our editorial teeth on those Fight Nights.

Three decades later, give or take, here I am. I'm still an *On Spec* editor, thanks to said tolerance mentioned above, and a published author of a trilogy and a collection of my own short stories. My work's appeared in anthologies, and I also have a non-fiction book out on how not to write speculative fiction. Most recently, I've become a YouTuber—I hesitate to use the word 'influencer' because I've only been putting out videos since last February. My new channel, *Writers' Rx—A Prescription for Your Fiction.*, is the platform from which I've leapt into the 21st century. Thirty years of editing short fiction has shown me where writers continue to make errors. I discuss many of these on *Writers' Rx*.

My son, Brennan, asked me recently, "Mom, you're not using *actual* stories sent in by writers, and copying their prose, word for word, are you? That would be harsh, pointing out where they've gone wrong in such a public way...." My answer to him was, "yes and no." When I'm discussing a problem, I definitely don't present the prose, word for word. That would be unkind and embarrassing for the writer. Instead, I alter the prose so I hope it isn't too recognizable. The point is to show where the writing has gone awry, and how to fix it. It's like reading your daily horoscope for your astrological sign. (And before anyone gets too riled up about me referencing astrology, I'm simply using it as a metaphor.) Let's say you're a Taurus. You're told what the daily influence is, but the horoscope also applies to everyone else who's a Taurus. The reading isn't targeted to *you* personally. It's a general interpretation of the flavour of the day. So instead of a personalized rejection a writer might receive from me under *On Spec's* purview, what I cover in *Writers' Rx* is a problem I've seen many times. I offer solutions on how to fix it. My point is to be helpful to a broader audience, to writers who are making similar errors.

In some cases, *I am* using the actual prose. There are some *On Spec* stories that are so good, they should be lauded. In these cases, and as a courtesy, I've asked the authors beforehand if I can showcase part of their work. It can be equally edifying to writers who are learning the craft, to explain why an opening, or a bit of description, or a piece of action, works as well as it does. I did this in my first long form video on short story openings, where I discussed two *On Spec* stories written by authors Chris Kuriata and Fiona Moore. Chris Kuriata's story, *Grandpa's Eye on the Afterlife*, *On Spec* issue 117, Volume 31, #3, and Fiona Moore's story, *That Fish Sex Movie*, *On Spec* issue #118,

Volume 31, #4, are wonderful examples of how opening hooks work really well in snagging reader interest. If you'd like to hear how I applaud these two works, go to "Short Story Openings Part One" - YouTube on Writers' Rx, to see how I break down the openings to discuss the multiple hooks the authors have used. I hope to feature more *On Spec* writers and their stories in upcoming videos.

Unlike the birth of Athena, who sprang from Zeus' head, my channel didn't happen overnight. Although *On Spec* provides much of the basis for the scripts I create for both my long and short videos, the technical side of things took me more time, money, and planning. I knew I wanted to start a channel on writing and editing, but how to do it? I had to do a lot of research, decide which equipment would work best, and how to edit my film clips. There was also the YouTube side of things—how to set up a channel, what limits there were (copyright, etc.), and what goals to aim for. The learning curve for me was huge. I really did have to catch up technically in many areas. I'm still learning (and re-learning) about my camera—it's a more complicated piece of equipment than I should be allowed to handle. The editing software I use is *Camtasia 2022*. It's relatively easy to learn, and offers a lot of diversity, including visual/audio options, zooms, transitional effects, annotations, etc. For me, the editing is the most fun part of the production.

If you're interested in starting your own YouTube channel, here's the equipment I use in my studio set-up:

Sony ZV1 Digital Camera for vlogging, etc. (great camera, but complicated unless you're a camera *aficionado*).

CAME-TV Lens Adapter for retractable lens cameras (necessary, as the Sony ZV1 isn't strong enough to support the weight of a teleprompter).

Sony Shooting Grip with Wireless Remote Commander (nice Bluetooth, essential when shooting from a distance).

Deity V-Mic D4 Duo Microphone (double sided mic – great if I ever want to interview a guest).

Two tripods, one for my camera, and one for my teleprompter, working in tandem.

Desview T3 Teleprompter with Bestview Teleprompting software (the T3 works well with a tablet, although you can also use your phone. I like using a teleprompter with a script, because it makes the editing easier).

ACER Tablet, mounted on the teleprompter.

Two Mountdog Softbox lighting kits 20" x 28" with bulbs and tripods (lighting is crucial). And for my 60 second YouTube Shorts: AVerMedia LiveStreamer webcam, mounted on my desktop (it works okay, but I wouldn't mind a sharper image, so I might have to invest in a new webcam).

Two Mountdog Lighting Softbox kits (as I said, lighting is key to a good image).

Elgato Pop-Up Chroma Green Screen (a great green screen because of its ease of use).

Extra ring light and V-light on short tripods for attaining lighting consistency (to light the lower corners of the green screen).

Finally, and since I'm being so technical, I'd like to say a little bit about our future—both as a collective and with *On Spec* in mind. Artificial Intelligence is alive and well, and here to stay. The genie is out of the bottle and he's claustrophobic, refusing to go back in. AI will be a huge influence on us as writers, editors, and YouTubers - on all creatives in general.

This May, I attended a graduating student exhibition at OCADU, the Ontario College of Art and Design University, where my daughter, Erin, was graduating. Among the students, AI is showing a strong influence. As *On Spec* editors, we'll continue to uphold the ideals of human writers and original non-AI generated work as our requirement for publication. However, one of the OCAD students I spoke with had developed an AI app where anyone—reader or writer—could generate a *video*, based on the kinds of stories they liked. For example, if they liked *Twilight*, they could take similar characters and create a comparable vampire love story—or they might create *Twilight* fan fiction. I'm not promoting *Twilight* by any means, nor am I about to discuss the ins and outs of copyright legalities, who should be paid for what, etc. But I did see an immediate application for what the student was suggesting. I told her as a writer, I'd always wanted to take my own *Tattooed Witch* trilogy and make a movie of it. I grew excited with the idea that *any writer could take their own work*, and easily create a video of their own story or novel. They could do entire novels, or generate chapters, possibly set up reader subscriptions. Of course, laws would have to be put in place in order to protect the author's copyright, and also the rights of any creators, actors, musicians, generating the visual images, sound, etc., in production. Nothing

would anger me more than someone taking my books and making a movie out of them without any input from me, or any compensation coming my way. But the idea, that this is where we may be headed as creators—as producers of *movies* of our *own* fiction—now that’s intriguing.

And what might it mean for *On Spec* and its future? Might we produce trailers for upcoming stories as a way to promote authors and the magazine? Might we move from being strictly about publishing the written word to generating videos with either the simple permission or actual help from our authors? Do our artists have a new way of generating income? It’s an intriguing idea with surprising potential. Who can say? With luck, and with laws protecting originators’ rights, the future could be whatever we make of it. ■

- Susan MacGregor.

P.S. If you’re interested, check out my YouTube channel at:
<https://www.youtube.com/@WritersRx>

Thanks for your support!

IN THIS ISSUE:

We’ll be giving you some writers new to us, like Rob Gordon, with his story “Second Sight”, along with Christopher Scott, with the intriguing title, “The Hidden Heart of Brass Attending”, Brian D. Hinson, with “Warden Trees”, Quinn J. Graham, with “The Necessity of a Shepherd”, and Brittany Amos, with her delightfully quirky “Hairstyles for the Apocalypse”. Familiar names include Douglas Smith with “Oregon Shooters”, Marie Brennan’s haunting “Your Body, My Prison, My Forge”, Peter G. Reynolds with another delightful Flick Gibson story, and Colleen Anderson, with “To Kill a Gorgon”. Poetry from Colleen Anderson, Pamela Yuen, Swati Chavda, and Maria Zoccola adds to the mix, and of course it won’t be complete without Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk’s bot and cartoon and our author/artist interviews by Roberta Laurie and Cat MacDonald.

IN UPCOMING ISSUES:

Look for new works from Fiona Moore, Brenda Tremayne, Andrew Knighton, Leslie Brown, Holly Schofield, Jeb Gaudet, Karl El-Koura, Shilpa Kamat, Kim Whysall-Hammond, and many others.