



Never a Doubt in my Mind...

...that I would get *Binding Contracts* edited and out to my beta readers.

Ha!

Editing my own work is like pulling my own teeth – it's painful, it's hard to see when you do something wrong, and there's lots of blood. And, with *Binding Contracts*, I needed a transfusion when I was done. There seemed to be a point in the book where I went from a fairly-competent writer to a brainless troglodyte. Characters did things without any motivation. The plot was confusing and had no direction. How I staggered to the end in the first draft, I'll never know.

But, after pulling things apart, rewriting a ton, reorganizing via an outline, offering a sacrifice to the cabal of the ghosts of Mark Twain, Edgar Allen Poe, and William Shakespeare, I came up with a book that actually makes sense.

Go beta readers, go!

Something to Look Forward To

Right after I finished the first draft of *Binding Contracts*, I got worried. I had no ideas. Nothing. Nada. Zilch. No inspiration, no thoughts, no rough ideas. This was a new thing for me. Had I exhausted my creativity after the 160,000 or so words I used to craft *Captured Hunter* and *Binding Contracts*? That's a damn short career as a writer.

However, in the midst of my preparations for *hari-kari*, I had a vision. My male lead, Carson, is a deeply unhappy person due to a devastating loss a few years ago. Following that tragedy, he made some bad decisions, and is ashamed of the life he lives. He is pretty much just going through the motions.

When Katie, a petite, adventurous, vibrant redhead shows up in his life, Carson starts to remember what it's like to be smitten with someone. He fondly remembers things like joy and hope. He's hesitant, though – he's quite sure Katie won't like the man he's become, and he fights his own fears as well as Katie, who can see that he's attracted to her and won't give up her pursuit of him.

Sound like a good start? I think so too. I'll keep you up-to-date as this one moves along.

Jamie's Gripe O' The Month – Starbucks Intimidation

Ah, Starbucks...that benign Seattle-based coffee merchant that has spread to all corners of the US and the globe. It seems there's a cup with that mermaid-looking logo in everyone's hand in the hands of at least 60% of the people I see every day. People grip their java with as much or more intensity than their cell phones. I think their next big marketing idea is to have a way to make the cup somehow double as a wireless device – good gracious, no one would ever look up again.

I have to admit, it's good coffee. But I rarely, if ever, drink it.

I see you recoiling in horror at my blasphemous statement while asking *Why?! I know, writers and Starbucks go together like peanut butter and jelly. I just don't see why. First of all, it's just hot water poured over ground-up beans with a few sugary mixes pumped in. And, even though they are usually pretty fast in there, the lines are often more than I can handle. And some of those coffees cost more than I earn in a month (remember, people, I'm a writer, and I don't sell a ton of books!)*

No, the reason I don't consume Starbucks coffee is simple: Starbucksophobia.

You won't find this term in any clinical psychiatric manual, but it exists, trust me. It goes something like this:

I get to the door and see at least 24 people on their phones in line, so I start to look over the 1,392 items on the menus above the counter. But, before I've had a chance to get through the iced teas, suddenly I'm right in front of some skinny guy wearing one of those little golf visors. He doesn't look up.

"Hellowelcometostarbucksutcanigetoutoday?"

Now, I want a medium coffee with one milk. Sounds simple enough, right?

BZZZZZ! Wrong answer!

As all the caffeine-deprived yupsters in skinny jeans grow impatient behind me, I've got to try and decide what Italian word defines the size of my drink, if I want blonde, brunette, redhead, or bald, which cow-, soy-, or emu-based creamy liquid I want in it, the ratio of caffeinated to decaffeinated, if it should be iced or hot, whether I want a something-chino or a something-iatto, if I want whipped cream, ice cream, or hand cream, and ten other terms I didn't know existed.

I start to sweat. The tension builds. I feel like it's a full count with the bases loaded, and we're down by three runs and I'm at the plate in my underwear. My order comes out like this:

"Uh.... I'd, uh, like an Avanti Mocha Blondie and Dagwood Triple-Decaf Double-Espresso Chino-Macchiato-Latte with Beet-Based Soy and Cruelty-Free Non-Dairy Whipped Cream."

If I manage to get that out without passing out from the lack of air that comes with enunciating such a sentence, the response is inevitably the same:

"Uh, we don't have a Smoothie Nitro Narino that comes in chocolate," or some damn thing. And they say it in that snide tone that makes you feel like you're a flaming moron for being over 27.

Faced with the task of fixing that order on the fly, I do what any self-respecting middle-aged person would do. I run across the street in a panic to the nearest street vendor and gasp, "medium coffee, one milk, please."

Screw Starbucks.

Jamie's Silver-Plated Writing Tip

OK, I don't know how to lead into this section with something creative or funny or witty, so I'll just say it. If you want to be a great (or even good) writer, learn your grammar. Period.

"But, Jamie," you whine, "I'm a creative writer, not an English teacher. That grammar crap is so *boring!*"

Yes, yes it is. Learn it anyway.

In my day job as a technical writer, precise instructions are crucial. Therefore, precise writing is crucial, meaning precise grammar is crucial. You can't have steps that require the reader follow them exactly if they aren't exactly clear and grammatically perfect. If I haven't been clear, precision is key.

Grammar is the framework that defines the scope of the words you are using. Think of a painting. It's contained by its frame; you get the full impact of the art by confining your assessment to what is within its borders. A beautiful painting is still beautiful even in the dingiest settings (not considering lighting) because it conveys itself through its self-defined rules. Grammar is the set of rules you use to define your writing.

People may somehow glean the meaning of your writing even if your grammar is questionable, but maybe they won't, and are you willing to take that chance? I'm not. It's the old adage about the Oxford

comma (**paper, pen, and eraser** versus **paper, pen and eraser**). There's wiggle room without that second comma. Proper grammar allows no wiggle room.

When you're telling a story, you're really doing the same thing. You want the reader to understand the mood, the motivation, and other details through your writing, and the only thing you have with which to do this is the text on the page. So it had better convey the idea you want *on its own*, with no interpretation possible.

Now, I'm not saying that you have to know the difference between a split-infinitive and the subjunctive. What I am saying is to write in your comfort level. Don't use words if you aren't certain of their meaning. Stay clear of semi-colons and colons until you know when they are appropriate. But there are some things you have to know: the differences between **their**, **there**, and **they're**, or **to**, **too**, and **two**, **that** versus **which**, stuff like that. If it intimidates you, Google it while you're writing, or at least during your editing. Soon it will become second-nature.

Now, since I've yelled at you, here's a funny story which will make you feel superior to the antagonist.

In my technical writer job, we were interviewing for another tech writer, and my boss asked me to phone-screen the candidates. I'm speaking to one applicant, and for the life of me I can't figure out how this person thinks he is a qualified technical writer. I ask him, point-blank, why he feels he can do this job.

"I used to work for a publisher and I edited a book, front to back."

This isn't ideal – we need writers, not editors, but it's something to go on, so I inquire about the book. Perhaps it was some sort of scientific text that required detailed accuracy. But Mr. Candidate tells me that's not the case.

"It was a stream-of-consciousness book about a 16th century Japanese admiral told from the perspective of a house cat."

Go ahead – re-read that. I'll wait.

Yeah, this person thought that editing a *fiction* book that *had no grammar* made him suited to write technical documentation. And that's before I even got a chance to think about the subject of the "book." The call didn't last much longer.

Dammit, I just thought of something kind of funny as a lead to this section:

"I hope I don't make any mistakes, because I'm going to use this section to bitch about writers who don't know their grammar."

Oh, well, better luck next time.