View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk

brought to you by CORE

provided by Scholarworks@GVSU

Language Arts Journal of Michigan

Volume 2 | Issue 1 Article 6

1-1-1986

Mis-Takes*

Ken Macrorie

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm

Recommended Citation

Macrorie, Ken (1986) "Mis-Takes*," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 6.
Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1750

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

MIS-TAKES*

Ken Macrorie

Recently I looked for teachers around the country whose students did remarkable things in their classrooms. I found that most of them habitually let their students know how much trouble and failure they themselves have experienced in doing the kinds of things they ask the students to do. In the future, I intend to follow their example. Here are four stories I'm thinking of recounting to students in my writing seminars.

1

I'll suggest to them that before a piece of their writing has been published they should never tell anyone--except maybe spouses, lovers, or roommates--that they've submitted it for publication. I remember in 1950 or thereabouts writing an article about one of the central weaknesses of armies. They are structured so that persons must obey completely--even abjectly--any order from the rank above them and must expect absolute obedience from the rank below them, a classic arrangement from the care and feeding of the sado-masochistic personality that I had been reading about in the then-current book **Escape from Freedom** by Erich Fromm.

Not surprising, I'd say. After all, the clear purpose of an army is to kill human beings. It would be pretty much to expect of any such institution that it also be kind, humane, and healthy in its procedures. The thing won't work if you allow people to say no when you order them to clean out a garbage can with a hot hose, stick a bayonet into someone, or press a button that destroys thousands of grandfathers, children, and patients in hospitals.

At that time I had published only two articles in my life and so was breathless with excitement when I received a letter saying that the editors of **The Antioch Review** liked my article and would publish it. But when I read further I found them claiming that they couldn't publish it until they had an article on the other side. They had in mind a colonel they knew, and said I'd have to wait until he wrote his views. Nevertheless, I instantly walked down the hall in the old wooden barracks building at Michigan State University that had been converted into classrooms and offices and told several of my young instructor colleagues that I was going to be published in **The Antioch Review.** They were impressed, most of them never having been published anywhere.

I waited and waited for a word from the **Review.** After six months I wrote and got back this reply: "We regret to say that the colonel didn't come through, so we can't publish your article." Years later, **The Antioch Review** published two other articles of mine, but I never forgot that first experience. Early on in my career as a writer, I became known around my department as one of those writers who talks about getting published.

I'm reminded of the graduate student I once met at a weekend party who told me he wrote for **The New Yorker.** I said, "You do?" trembling with thoughts of eating lunch at the Algonquin Hotel with Jimmy Thurber or E.B. White. I asked the grad student to cite a couple of his writings so I could read them, and he said, "Oh, I've never had anything **published** in **The New Yorker,** I just send a lot of things to them. That's what I meant by saying, 'I write **for The New Yorker.**'"

2

Later, I guess it was in 1954, when I

*Reprinted from the Iowa English Bulletin 34 (Jan. 1986): 35-39

showed the first draft of my doctoral thesis to my advisor at Teachers College in New York, he said, "I'm sorry to say this, Ken, but I think you'll have to remove the word **I** from this chapter, your case-history of following the New Jersey reporter on a story." I had written a thesis on objectivity and responsibility in newspaper reporting and had followed four newspaper reporters, checking out questions of objectivity that arose as they worked through reports from first conception into print. In the one case-history my advisor was pointing to, I had purposely included myself, my feelings, predilections, etc., as observer of the reporter. I wanted to show my problems as an observer and to suggest what the newspaper reporter's story might have looked like if she or he had permission and space to do such a thing.

"I can't do that," I said. "The use of **I** makes one of the major points in my thesis."

"I realize that," said my advisor, "but I'm sure Mr.   , the head of the department, wouldn't allow it."

We were talking in the advisor's apartment--he was a friendly and hospitable man who usually served cookies and tea with advice. I think I turned white with anger. I know I said, "Well, in that case, that chapter is out. I won't use it at all," and I stormed out of the room.

I didn't use that chapter, and the thesis was approved without others seeing my case-history with **I** in it.

A few weeks later, my advisor smiled at me and said, "I showed your thesis to the Columbia University Press. An editor there would like to talk to you about the possibility of publishing it." When I spoke to the editor at the Press, he said--as university press editors almost always say to thesis writers--"Of course, you would have to make it into a book first." He meant that like any proper thesis, mine was not shaped to make readers want to turn the page. And he was right. "I'd like you to write a sample chapter and give me an outline of the rest of the book as you conceive it. And then we can give you a decision."

I went home that evening floating high, near the bright ceiling of the subway, and then thought, "I want this book to be alive in its writing, not academic, and I don't want anyone to tell me once again what needs to go into it and what needs to be left out. I understand what I've done in this work better than anyone else because I was the one who thought of doing it." So I quickly wrote a popularized version of my thesis, breezy and a little slapdash, all the while imagining every woman and man in Manhattan stepping in mud puddles crossing the street while reading my book. Then, I sent it to the Press.

Back it came quickly with a note saying only, "I'm sorry to say that this work is not suitable for our list of books."

Here's one of the points of the stories I'm telling--when I got that rejection, I knew the judgment was right. Suddenly, I saw the rewritten version of my thesis as jejune and a little foolish. As writers, we need strong egos to withstand rejection, but we could do with a little less ego when judging our own first drafts.

3

About fourteen years later, I sent a publisher a manuscript of a book about college teaching and learning called **Uptaught**. It went to Henry Thoma, a distinguished old-style Boston editor, who was head of a department at Houghton Mifflin. In that book I had written an almost endless collection of personal stories of my own educational experience. It was half biography and half analysis of the ways of teachers I had observed in my years in university classrooms and corridors. Henry wrote back that he couldn't see publishing it--fascinating, he said, but too long, unfocused, and windy. As before in my adventure with Columbia University Press, I knew he was right the minute I read his words, which chopped my heart. I walked around the pond in the woods I lived in for three or four days cursing Thoma and Houghton Mifflin and all the gods or devils who mistreat young writers, and then I sat down and cut the manuscript in about half, dropped many of the grand accusations I had made, and reduced the book to a series of short anecdotes, most of which took up a page or less. I showed the results to an editor who had published textbooks of mine, and he

said yes immediately. I had changed the book drastically. Now, it was a quick read that affected many teachers. Readers said to me, "I sat down and read that book in one sitting," or "Stayed up into the morning to finish that book."

4

My last story is green in my memory, about a happening that occurred approximately two months before the moment when I am writing these words. I had had a call from Pat Reed, the editor of the **Albuquerque** (New Mexico) **Journal's** weekly magazine **Impact**. She had been thinking about interviewing me about my new book **20 Teachers** that was being published by Oxford University Press. But after talking with me, she said, "You might consider writing an article yourself for **Impact**--on education or some other topic."

I'd never had such an invitation from an editor of a magazine other than teachers' journals, and I was excited. Right away I thought, "I could do that article about basketball I've been thinking of for three years." Albuquerque is a rabid basketball town, and the idea seemed right to me. I could imagine a four-color photograph or drawing on the front cover of **Impact**. I went quickly and joyously at the job of writing the article, "Basketball Is Overcoached." The writing went well. Some funny stuff in it, I thought, good stories, and a major suggestion for rule changes that would help give the game back to the players to some extent. Because the college basketball season was coming to a close, I wanted to get the article printed before the national championship was played, when interest would be high in the sport. I should have let the article cool off a little more, I realized later, but time pressed, and I sent the manuscript.

I love Pat Reed's sense of humor and her delight in putting out a lively, well-written magazine, but I didn't enjoy waiting for her decision on my article. After three agonizing weeks had gone by--the basketball season slipping away before me--I called her and she said, "I've been debating. I need a lot of time to study the article. If I can find enough things in it that I like and then cut the things I don't like, I'll use it." I was hurt by that remark but at the same time I respected it. She wasn't hedging. She was telling me the truth. "It's much too long," she said, "except for a lead article, and I don't think it's that. It needs to be cut in about half."

Suddenly, while I was becoming paralyzed by this life-and-death conversation about my article, I knew she was right. I said, "Why don't you look for possible ways to cut and I'll do the same with my copy here in Sante Fe." We both went to work.

I'm proud to say that I cut it almost exactly in half. I found that my first draft was ridiculously overwritten. When Pat got my cut version, she said she liked some parts I had cut and couldn't bring herself to cut as much as I did. A rare victory for an author over an editor in the cutting game.

But Pat had edited the manuscript better than I had. On April 2, 1985, the article appeared, and I've never been happier about seeing a work of mine in print.

****

I've recounted two successes and two heart-rendering (as my wife and I like to call them) rejections. That's pretty good, and not at all representative of the ratio of rejections and acceptances that most writers learn to live with in their lives. Like others who write for publication, I keep writing. Often a rejection--even without any suggestions about how to redo the work--shocks me into seeing my writing with detachment, and I hack it in half, change its flow, find a new voice for it, or otherwise rewrite it drastically, and send it off again. Many times those reworked manuscripts never see print, and the few that come out of my word processor in a rush of rightness and true voice make it on the first submission.

It's painful to make oneself vulnerable by sending out manuscripts to an editor. Professional writers do it, though. That's what makes them professionals. Writers sometimes feel that letters from editors have been sent down to them from Mount St. Helens. But they continue to write and submit their work.

After I've told my students about

these experiences, I'll find it harder to sigh in disgust and declaim my annoyance if they have overwritten a paper 100%, failed to understand their audience, got stuck in the mud of their own egos, failed to see the form that their meaning and purpose should be suggesting to them, etc., etc. I will lower my expectations that their first try at a piece of writing will be marvelous. It might be, but if it isn't it's like most of my first tries. Like mine, their writings often need more than a weekend to cool off before being polished into a submittable draft.

If, after months and sometimes years, we professional writers can't judge our own work any better than we do, when we step into our role as writing teachers should we pretend that we can judge our students' work any more objectively?

All the more reason for those standard procedures employed by teachers who are members of what I call the Movement for Meaning. They arrange that a student's peers will respond to his or her writing, and whenever possible, they find some method of publishing the work so that it's read by persons outside the classroom.

In the real world of publishing--which is the one we teachers are frequently holding up to our students as a model--writers customarily turn their completed manuscripts in to an editor, who accepts or rejects them, and then begins to work with the author to improve them. In newspaper offices, a reporter often tells an editor what sort of story he or she obtained, discusses with the editor its importance, debates what angle or lead seems right for shaping the article. Then, when the writer turns in the first draft to an editor, usually there occurs mutual questioning, shaping, and refining.

Writing teachers with large classes can't furnish such editorial response and help of that kind for every piece of writing done by students, but selected writings can be brought before the writer's peers gathered in large or small groups and given hardheaded suggestions for improvement.

The more we teachers arrange such help for our student writers, the more they will develop professional habits. If we imply that human editors and writers customarily perform without writing through these processes, we are deceiving them and the craft.

Ken Macrorie, author of Telling Writing, is a Professor Emeritus of English at Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, Michigan.