

Writing Tips from Ellen Cassedy

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Sure You Want to Write a Page-turner?



The term “page-turner” is high praise. We all want to write a book that readers can’t put down.

Or do we?

At Book Expo America a few years ago, I was one of a row of authors signing stacks of books. In front of us, readers had queued up to receive their free copies. As the lines inched forward, we authors signed as fast as we could.

At one point in that breathless hour, a voice to my right caught my attention. “I loved your book!” a gushing fan was saying to the author next to me. “I finished the whole thing in one afternoon.”

My fellow author responded graciously. After she sent the enthusiastic reader on her way, I asked her out of the side of my mouth how the comment made her feel.

“Not that great,” she muttered. “It took me years to write.”

A page-turner goes down like soft-serve ice cream. “I devoured it,” people say. “I couldn’t get enough.”

When I read, it can take a while for an author to win my trust. At the start of a book, I often read slowly. Once I feel secure in the writer’s hands, though, I let go. Then, sometimes, I’ll speed for the finish line. At two a.m., I’m rubbing my eyes, only 40 pages left. I don’t care how painstakingly the author labored over those last pages. I’m heading for home base. Finally I slide onto the last page in a cloud of dust... and then it’s over. What a great read!

But I may not remember that book in the morning. I may not recommend that book to others. The book I read as fast as I could may not turn out to be the one I find myself haunted by, the one that changes me.

Elmore Leonard (1925-2013), the prolific crime writer, is famous for his Tenth Rule: “Try to leave out the part that readers tend to skip.”

Leonard’s prose is hardboiled, crystalline, dialogue-heavy, without a wasted word. “If it sounds like writing,” he said, “I rewrite it.”

In a similar vein, recently I came across a product called Hemingway App. Named after the writer with the famously blunt, concise prose style, it highlights the use of passive voice, adverbs, and “overly complicated” words and sentences to help you purge them from your work. The goal: to make your writing “bold and clear.”

I’m 100% sure that if you were to let this app roam at will over the English-language literary canon, it would flag some of the best-loved lines ever written.

In fact, when you run Hemingway’s own prose through the app, much of it fares poorly.

I’m all for boldness and clarity. I scour my work for unnecessary words. But.

Sometimes – as a reader and as a writer – I prefer a writing style that does call attention to itself. I like it when the syntax or the diction or the alternation of long and short sentences cries out for notice. I like being forced to slow down and take my time.

A novel I read recently was written almost entirely in iambs, I realized partway through. Every sentence scanned. I paused often to savor its poetic riches.

Among the qualities that distinguish a book from a film is the level of participation required of the reader. It's up to you as a reader to imagine what the characters look and sound like, to fill in the sights and sounds of street scenes and landscapes, to furnish the interiors. Every reader's novel is a little different. My *Jane Eyre* doesn't look like or sound exactly like yours.

Doesn't it take time for readers to carry out their side of the bargain, to fill in those details for themselves?

So I wonder about the page-turner. Yes, I want my readers to turn the pages of my book – all of them, cover to cover. But I also want them to stop turning now and then. To put the book down and take a breath. To slow down and let the writing work its magic.

Ellen Cassedy is the author of *We Are Here: Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust* (Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2012). To see all of her Writing Tips, visit her website at www.ellencassedy.com.