

jcannonbooks

Because everybody  
needs an editor . . .

and a newsletter



## Travels with Johnny

No one passed the unannounced editing test in last month's newsletter.

It is possible you don't care, you didn't know it was a test because it was well camouflaged, or you saw it and figured it couldn't be a test because it went beyond your idea that an editor's only responsibility is to move commas around. Comma shuffling is a highly satisfying part of the job, but other duties include safeguarding the fairness, accuracy, balance, readability, and continuity of all words and images in manuscripts.

The item last month on the pilcrow (¶) included a photo of a black bird that looked suspiciously like a crow. Clever, you thought. The image sort of matches the words.

The bird was a raven. Same family as crow, but different species. Sure, people think it's no big deal, and who can tell the difference anyway, but when you are writing sentences or presenting photos, every word and impression matters. I expected canceled subscriptions, although I figured it probably wouldn't be as bad as when the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, where I worked, mistakenly published a photo of the Air Force Thunderbirds with an advance story about an upcoming Miramar Air Show, where the Navy Blue Angels were to put on their annual performance. Yes, Miramar is a Marine Corps base. Yes, people at the newspaper can tell the difference between a white F-16 with red and blue highlights and a blue F/A-18 with yellow highlights. No, the newspaper didn't do

it on purpose. No, the newspaper had no deep-seated hatred for the military. It was just a goof. I dredge up this example again to make sure you know there is always someone who will spot your mistakes, even if the error is not as sacrilegious as suggesting that an Air Force aerobatic team would perform in a Navy and Marine Corps town. And some people who know a mistake has been made are not the type to complain about it, but they'll harbor secret thoughts about your fitness to write things.

Why is this a Travels-with-Johnny feature, anyway? Although Johnny is vaccinated, he's still leery about travel. Johnny shot the photo of that bird at the Tower of London a few years ago. A bunch (gaggle? herd? murder? pod?) of ravens, as you probably know, has called at the Tower home since about the seventeenth century. Tradition holds that if the ravens were to disappear somehow, which would be difficult because they are captive and Tower captives don't have much of a life expectancy (see Boleyn, Anne), then the Crown and Britain would fall. You may think this bird tradition is almost as outdated and silly as the monarchy itself, which means you need a refresher on British history. For that, we rely on a conversation between King Arthur and two peasants, Dennis and his mother, in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, a work of unassailable scholarship:

**King Arthur:** I am your king.

**Dennis's mother:** Well, I didn't vote for you.

**King Arthur:** You don't vote for kings.

**Dennis's mother:** Well, how'd you become king then?

**King Arthur:** The Lady of the Lake, her arm clad in the purest shimmering samite, held aloft Excalibur from the bosom of the water, signifying by divine providence that I, Arthur, was to carry Excalibur. That is why I am your King.

**Dennis:** Listen, strange women lyin' in ponds distributin' swords is no basis for a system of government. Supreme executive power derives from a mandate from the masses, not from some farcical aquatic ceremony.

I offer this valuable lesson as homage (see blog item below or at [jcannonbooks.com](http://jcannonbooks.com)) and attribute the quoted material to the Rotten Tomatoes website. I further affirm it is a faithful rendering of the script, as I have seen the movie at least a dozen times and have memorized most of the lines. And now, a message from the jcannonbooks corporate counsel: We hold that the review exception to U.S. copyright laws allows us to reprint these lines.

My test could prompt a deeper reaction among readers than I expected. Suppose a reader decided that reliance on a dozen captive ravens is a weak national defense for a critical U.S. ally, and setting the birds free would teach Parliament a lesson. You would have to gameplan for the Tower's ceremonial guards, the Beefeaters, who are more than entertaining, history-loving tour guides in peculiar costumes. Our Beefeater yeoman warder was retired from the British special forces, and he assured us that he and his fellow guards are well acquainted with weapons other than halberds and muskets.







*Nevermore.*

---

## New blog item for the click-averse

(You can and should click here to read the illustrated, HTML-loaded version on the [jcannonbooks website](#).)

### Copy that

Homage lives on the same literary street as plagiarism, but no one will accuse you of a moral failing if you treat plagiarism as a neighborhood pariah.

If it is not obvious that you intend to offer homage in something you write, then you have crossed the editor's and society's red line into word thievery.

The late British author Philip Kerr began his novel *Greeks Bearing Gifts* with a passage that is a clear nod to his literary forebear, Raymond Chandler. By tracking a famous opening in noir literature, Kerr wants readers to admire the sly reference. This is the crucial point. When trying to do homage, you must be confident that readers will get it. Kerr's career helps: He showed himself over

the years to be too good a writer to copy anyone, especially a god of noir.

From *Greeks Bearing Gifts*:

**There was a murderous wind raging through the streets of Munich when I went to work that night. It was one of those cold, dry Bavarian winds that blow up from the Alps with an edge like a new razor blade and make you wish you lived somewhere warmer, or owned a better overcoat, or at least had a job that didn't require you to hit the clock at six p.m.**

From Raymond Chandler's *Red Wind* (complete with 1930s-vintage description of wives that many would find ill-advised today, but that's another issue):

**There was a desert wind blowing that night. It was one of those hot dry Santa Anas that come down through the mountain passes and curl your hair and make your nerves jump and your skin itch. On nights like that every booze party ends in a fight. Meek little wives feel the edge of the carving knife and study their husbands' necks. Anything can happen. You can even get a full glass of beer at a cocktail lounge.**

Waaaaay back in elementary school, when my classmates and I were assigned to do a report, our first stop often was the encyclopedia shelf at the library. Do a booklet about Spain? Abraham Lincoln? Lake Michigan? Pull out the *Compton's*, look up whatever it was, and—eek!—start copying. The nuns eventually made it clear that copying directly from an encyclopedia was not what they meant by research. I raise the point because some adult writers still find copying to be acceptable. I call it laziness and worse.

You can't lift a sentence, paragraph, or page from another writer or slightly paraphrase the work, skip the attribution, and present it as your own, even if it comes from a collaborative source like Wikipedia. Some adults don't seem to know that. You can make use of something if you tell us who it belongs to. Readers didn't open your work because they wanted to dive into a book by someone who coughs up interesting passages written by someone else. They want to know what imaginative, original, and creative things you have to offer.

T.S. Eliot is among those who have attempted to set this right.

"Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different," he wrote in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*

Even unintended musical homage can get T-boned by copyright infringement, something George Harrison learned from the Chiffons. And the whole sampling

aspect of modern musical genres has me wondering how anyone gets away with that. I guess it's fine if you get permission and pay, but c'mon, you got nuthin' else?

An odd trap that snares some writers is attributing a famous line to someone who didn't say or write it. Many scholars say it is likely Winston Churchill never authored or uttered the line about terminal prepositions that has long been attributed to him: "This is the kind of arrant pedantry up with which I will not put." Maybe it's because the line is funny and seems to fit our understanding of his personality. But if you attribute something to someone who didn't say it, I give you an A for effort and an F for fact-checking.

Characters themselves have been co-opted in the book world. That doesn't mean it is outright thievery, but the practice doesn't sound like homage. In author Nick Petrie's Peter Ash mystery series, the protagonist has a sidekick, Lewis, who is able to turn street patois off and on as the situation requires. That is an interesting trait for a well-realized sidekick, characters who are in short supply and great demand. It is my opinion, and I am but a humble blogger, that Lewis too closely parallels one of the detective genre's pre-eminent sidekicks, Spenser's Hawk, whom author Robert B. Parker often described as able to match his speech style to anyone from high society swell to street gangster. Hawk will always be one of the baddest badasses in secondary characterdom, so please don't tell him I called him secondary. But I think Hawk should have a talk with Lewis.

---

**Kind regards,  
jcannonbooks**

April 2021



©2021 jcannonbooks | 9245 Twin Trails Drive #721492 San Diego CA 92172

[Web Version](#)

[Preferences](#)

[Forward](#)

[Unsubscribe](#)

