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Because everybody  
needs an editor . . .

and a newsletter



## Christmas present. And past.

To read the following post on my blog, where it comes accessorized with a photo of Neil Diamond, [click here](#).

Not to add to the stress you feel this holiday season, but today's subject is tense.

And not to worry because I've already figured out who to blame.

The issue has to do with novels written in English. Fortunately, I have learned that Europe, a continent east of us, includes a whole country named England that bears some responsibility for what has occurred.

As it turns out, writers, editors, publishers, and others involved in making novels have split into two camps. One, comprised mostly of UK and Australian authors, favors use of the present tense for nearly all verbs. The other, mostly Americans, favors the use of the past tense in books. I had thought I was the only person to notice, and I was excited to be able to bring you this breaking verb news until I found that this *contretemps* (*non-English word, possibly French—Ed.*) is nothing new. It likely has been around for as long as the English have been using an extra e in judgement, swapping out the z in civilisation, and insisting on putting steering wheels on the wrong side of cars. Or lorries, whatever those are.

In most novels I read, past tense is king. It is what I expect. It is what I have nearly always seen in novels. And therefore, it must be best. My preference probably was set when I was about nine and reading whatever adventure books I could find at the Elmwood Park Public Library.

Something like this:

Pete jumped on his Schwinn and pedaled to the police station. When he arrived, he reported that three men were robbing the corner market.

“Oh my gosh,” he said to Officer Jones.

All past tense. And by the way, Pete didn’t use his cellphone because that was the 1960s.

But I have watched as the present tense works to unseat the past. In such books, the example above would be rendered like this:

Pete jumps on his Schwinn and pedals to the police station. When he arrives, he reports that three men are robbing the corner market.

“Oh my gosh,” he says to Officer Jones.

When I see that present tense, it makes me stop to think about word usage, which is exactly what the author does not want me to do. He or she wants me to suspend disbelief and come along for the adventure, not pause to consider some dumb grammar thing.

I have spotted it more and more, although sometimes it doesn’t stop me. I didn’t even notice it in *The Time Traveler’s Wife*, maybe because I was caught up in the story (score one for author Audrey Niffenegger). I also didn’t notice it in *Rabbit, Run*, lo those many years ago. The reason may be that we students (all boys) at Holy Cross High School were stunned to know we were not only allowed but required to read a book that contained what was then considered graphic sex but today would barely arouse the [book-ban fury of a Texas state legislator](#). I did notice it in the [Thursday Murder Club series](#), but Richard Osman’s two books are so much fun that the tense didn’t make me tense.

Nevertheless, you can’t easily escape the hold of the past-present preference. I edited subscriber Debbie H.’s imaginative teen fantasy novel a while back. It was written in present, and I recommended that she change it all to past. I didn’t consider that Debbie lives in Australia, where a reader is more likely to see present tense. Sorry, Debbie. And I’m grateful that you and Chris I. subscribe to this blog, which allows me to say it circulates in both hemispheres.

Reasons for the past-present schism run deeper than an author's residence. Those who favor the present tense, a group that includes some Americans, have said the present tense makes the novel feel more in the moment. More like a screenplay. Something that is happening now. Others likely feel compelled to reject timeworn dogma. Some contend that literary artists can do whatever evokes an emotional and intellectual response, even something as simple as changing tenses. Have at it, I say.

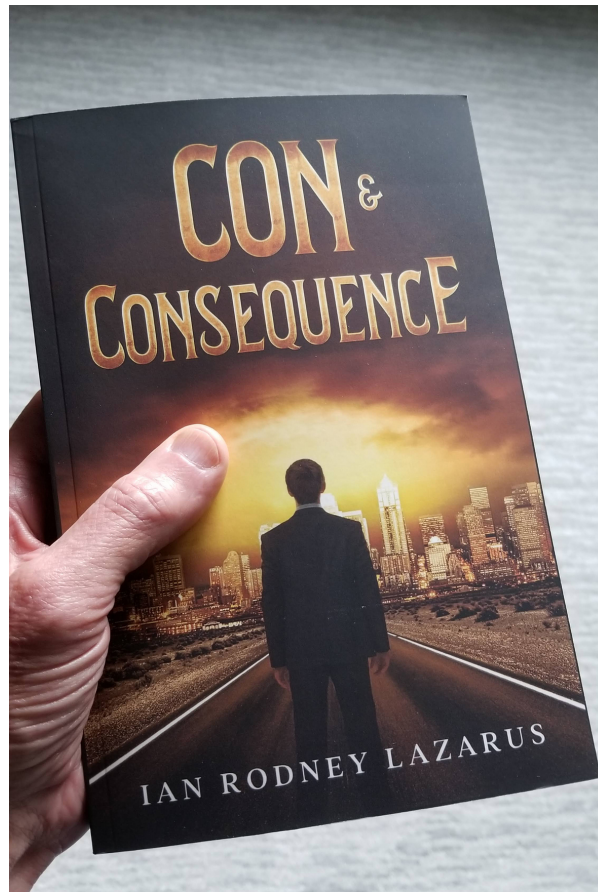
And as long as we're on the subject of said vs. says, a detour into the world of attribution is in order. If you hunt, and not very hard, you will find scads of material online purporting to be jazzy substitutes for the word said, so an author doesn't have to keep writing he said or she said. That is plainly ridiculous. Why do you need that? Do you want to write something like he emoted or she opined? Yecchhh. The word said (or says) in attribution, or dialogue tag as the fancy book editors say, serves a purpose because it is invisible. You want the reader to focus on what the character is expressing, not the manner in which it is expressed. Readers have seen said or says so often that their eyes fairly skip over it without comprehension loss. Why interrupt a reader with a clunker like he hypothesized or she contributed? Occasionally you need he replied or she continued to make sure readers follow along, but otherwise, let said and says do their background work so readers can admire the strong verbs and nouns you surely are using to write the guts of your story.

Now back to our regularly scheduled program:

It may be that an individual's preference for present or past tense in books is set in childhood. Sort of like an accent if you exclude people like Damian Lewis and Matthew Rhys. You grew up reading either past or present, that is what you like, and you can't change it.

I probably always will prefer books in the past tense, but if the novel is good, I have begun to understand that it doesn't matter.

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## Author news

**Ian Lazarus** has published his first novel, *Con & Consequence*, an international thriller that sets a breakneck pace and involves settings in Michigan, New York, Dubai, Egypt, and Israel. Ian, who lives in San Diego, uses his experience as an international businessman to make these places come alive. And a rogue intelligence agent, twisty plot, and the possibility of a nuke going off in Tel Aviv do tend to keep you reading. [Available now on Amazon](#). jcannonbooks provided editing recommendations.

Congratulations, Ian.

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Kind regards,  
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December 2021



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