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Because everybody
needs an editor . . .

and a newsletter

Glad I read that

In an author's note that accompanies *Cloud Cuckoo Land*, Anthony Doerr describes his novel as a "paean to books." Paean is a word that isn't used nearly enough, so let me add that this superb book is also a paean to libraries and librarians, a paean to the recording of history, and a paean to those who recognize the folly of walls. That last one sounds odd, but Doerr's metaphoric strength is hard to miss in his longish book (*Editor's note: Doerr gets a pass on length because he made his bones in All the Light We Cannot See, and if he wrote a million-word book, I would read it*). Readers who go along on this journey encounter five main characters flung out over three converging storylines set in the Middle Ages, the present day, and the not-too-distant future. You would think it would be hard to make that work, but the book is intricate, satisfying, and there are those walls.

As I read it, though, I had a San Diego reaction to that portion set in the future, the part involving a girl named Konstance and an artificial intelligence named Sybil (think Hal with shimmering golden threads rather than a red dot). Konstance's situation somehow conjured for me a gigantic news story that happened in San Diego County in March 1997. Thirty-nine people made the ultimately fatal decision to believe the fantastical deliverance stories woven by a man and woman who called themselves Do and Ti. The people shut themselves into a rented mansion in ritzy Rancho Santa Fe and participated in a ritual they thought would propel them to a new level of existence on a spaceship that was

trailing the Comet Hale-Bopp, which was transiting near to earth at that time. Ti (Bonnie Nettles) died in 1985 after having established the doctrines of the religious group that eventually became known as Heaven's Gate, and Do (Marshall Applewhite) was in the mansion.

Ti and Do, it turned out, engineered an unfathomable mass suicide.

From my perch in the *San Diego Union-Tribune* newsroom then, I observed a process I had no idea was already headed toward oblivion at many newspapers. The typical metro daily at that time could focus considerable resources on something. Newspapers like the *U-T* still had enough advertising and circulation revenue to pack a newsroom with beat reporters, general assignment reporters, specialists, photographers, editors, graphics journalists, and librarians. Details emerged, journalists pieced them together, and America had a horror story.

Heaven's Gate and *Cloud Cuckoo Land* are quite different, of course. But I keep comparing the walls. The believers who took their own lives twenty-five years ago (with barbiturate-laced apple sauce and pudding) as instructed were unable to break through mental barriers they made with the help of their two unhinged guides. In Doerr's book, Konstance defeats a wall that is at once physical, mental, and easy to ignore because breaching it seems impossible.

The book makes what happened in Rancho Santa Fe no less sad. But even if you have never heard of Heaven's Gate, you're familiar with the world's cycle of atrocities. Konstance and other characters in the book are served up as a flicker of assurance. Small kindnesses that people do for each other might add up to hope.

Wish I'd written that

From *Beartown* by Fredrik Backman:

David could get into an argument with a door, and Peter was so averse to conflict that he couldn't even kill time.

The long and the short of it

You can read the illustrated version of this item on my blog, [Take My Word for It](#). Just click here.

Of all the nonsensical demands that publishers make upon a writer, like recognizable syntax, coherence, and a story that readers might find interesting, is any so capricious, so preposterous as length?

Did the pope limit the number of Michelangelo's brush strokes?

I admire self-confidence. But hang around long enough in the unmapped tunnels that lead to a publisher willing to ink up the presses for your manuscript, you learn that certain rules are inescapable. As we all know, there must be rules. They apply even to those who would skirt the soul-crushing effort to find a literary agent and traditional publisher and instead produce a novel themselves. The traditional houses have had a long time to figure out what works with readers.

Novelists and those who aspire to be called such must have a common language. The language of length for a reader is pages. Not so for a book writer. And it's not chapters, volumes, tons, miles, acres, hectares, atomic weight, nor light-years. It is words. Publishers, editors, agents, and others rely on number of words because format, layout, and presentation do not affect it. The only thing that changes the number of words is a good editor. Word count is a measure that is fast, understandable, and comparable.

Publishers and know-it-all editor types have settled on suggested lengths for books, word counts that have some variation depending on genre and an author's reputation. These guidelines will seem reasonable to any author who considers the extremes. Out on fiction's long end, the kind of length that terrifies procrastinating high school and college students who have a paper due tomorrow, are *Bleak House* at 361,000 words, *Les Misérables* at 546,000, *War and Peace* at 587,000, and *Atlas Shrugged* at 645,000 (a lot less if you skip John Galt's interminable speech).

Hemingway (supposedly) occupies the other end of the spectrum with this short story of six words: For sale: baby shoes, never worn.

Leaves a vast middle, doesn't it?

Publishers have concluded that a new author's first fiction should not attempt to challenge Tolstoy in the length department. A mystery, for example, has a sweet spot of about eighty thousand words, according to most experts, and

while I am not so deluded that I would call myself an expert, I agree with such a limit. Science fiction and fantasy often can be longer, even more than one hundred thousand words, because orcs, grokking, and Lannister vs. Stark require explanation and world-building. That limit of eighty thousand words applies to the manuscript you intend to pitch to a New York house and the novel you will present to the world via KDP or another self-publishing platform.

My sad duty as an editor is to inform writers, especially those writing a first novel, that not every word in a manuscript is priceless. Publishers who read writers' query letters want to know the novel's word count. If it's a 165,000-word first mystery, that manuscript probably is headed for the digital slag heap no matter how the author turns the charming-but-flawed-main-character-saves-the-world-from-a-lunatic theme. Again with the self-editing thing. Yes, it's hard. Yes, nouns and verbs and occasionally adjectives are your children. Yes, deletion is unfair to those words that stood resolutely in place since the moment you summoned them from the electronic haze. But a writer has to entrance readers. Flabby sentences, dead-end secondary plots, superfluous characters, and phrases and sentences that have no reason for being in your book other than you like the sound of them convey little other than readers to the exits. The handiest editing tools may well be the delete key and the word count indicator on the lower left side of the Word screen.

Eighty thousand words let a talented writer weave a spell, develop characters, and build an audience. If you offer fewer words, each becomes more important. It forces the use of robust verbs, meaty nouns, and active voice. No one says that can be accomplished quickly. Consider a comment variously attributed to Pascal, Twain, Eliot, and others: I would have written shorter, but I didn't have time.

When you make forays to bookstores or the public library, your attention will snag on books of far more than eighty thousand words. But a close look likely will reveal that the author is someone who has survived the frightful first novel experience with enough success that the publishing company recognizes it has stumbled upon a vein of book buyers. Such experience may then persuade the publisher to allow that author's later books to grow, sometimes to an extravagant and puzzling length. How else to explain *The Pillars of the Earth* by Ken Follett?

**Kind regards,
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