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Because everybody
needs an editor . . .

and a newsletter

Blend into the wordwork

Any author searching for an editor is likely to want someone who has the technical knowledge to polish (or make sense of) a manuscript, familiarity with other books in the same genre, the ability to coach and cajole, and a decent laptop-side manner.

You don't want a lollygagger, a shuffler, or a dope.

You know that because I have told you so before and you have memorized my blog posts. Still, you should demand more, as illustrated in these analogies, some of which involve animals.

When you need an editor, you want a chameleon. You want someone whose presence in your book is hard to find. Fixes, insertions, and rewrites that good editors supply should have the feel of something you would have written had only you thought of it. The new words should blend into the existing sentence or paragraph without calling attention to themselves. Readers who love *The Great Gatsby* praise F. Scott Fitzgerald and not his editor, Maxwell Perkins. That is as it should be. Editors who want praise from the multitudes can go write their own books.

When you need an editor, you want a cowbird. They are brood predators that sneak into nests of other bird species when the resident adults are away, toss out and destroy an egg or two, and lay one or more cowbird eggs in the newly

available space (deletion and insertion, to pound you over the head with the metaphor). The parent birds return to the nest and, in the best of cases for the cowbirds, fail to notice anything has changed, incubate all the eggs, and care for any hatched cowbird chick as if it were one of their own. Maybe the foster phoebes or thrushes are forgiving. Maybe they are imbeciles. But the point, he said unnecessarily, is that the cowbird insertion is indistinguishable.

I have heard about and may even have witnessed human examples of editor switcheroos. At larger newspapers, it has long been tradition for copy editors to come up with headlines rather than have the reporter who wrote the piece also supply a snappy handful of words that describe a twenty-inch story, fit the allotted space, and entice a person to read it. It is among the many newspaper oddities that are impossible to explain to normal people, but it made sense to us. The custom probably is deteriorating in a world where newspapers invest far less in copy editors, and more's the pity. The deadline-every-second online world has prompted many newspapers to have reporters make feeble attempts at headline writing, at least for early online versions of stories.

But if we step back a few decades to a newspaper where I once worked, you would be familiar with the tale of a copy editor who twisted cowbird culture into sordid betrayal. Headlines are supposed to capture the essence of a story in a few engaging words, be fair, and not just repeat stuff from the first paragraph of the story (aka the lede) because that would be dull, repetitive, and loathsome. I may have witnessed this event, or it may be apocryphal, given that so many newspaper stories have traveled the word conveyor belt through my head. The point, anyway, is that a copy editor liked the lede of a story so much that he stole the best parts for his headline. To hide his perfidy, he rewrote the reporter's lede into something less interesting and expected no one to notice. Thief! Cheater! Anti-Cowbird!

When you need an editor, you want Hugh Laurie, Damian Lewis, or Kate Winslet. Any of these actors from across the Atlantic can slide into an American accent indistinguishable from that of a native. I didn't know Damian Lewis was English until I listened to him use his everyday voice on a late-night talk show. His Bobby Axelrod and Lt. (later Capt.) Winters raised not a bit of suspicion. Imagine if these folks were editors. They could make their writing voices sound like yours while filling in gaps, making suggestions, and ironing out technical gaffes. That assumes these actors know how to write, but why wouldn't they? People with English accents are just smarter.

By the way, I wrote the headline for this article. I thought you should know.

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



Potential editor. Photo by Michael Held on Unsplash.

Kind regards,
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