
How I Overhauled My Mechanic's Novel

Dan Greenburg

In Dan Greenburg's take-off on repair service ethics, notice how humor can help carry a discussion of what ultimately can be a serious problem. Also note how Greenburg tells a story which, while relating to all our experiences, includes a great deal of information about the craft and skills of writing.

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My mechanic was having trouble with his novel. Know- 1
ing I am an author, he asked if I could help. I told him I'd have
a look. He told me he needed it back pretty soon. I told him it
was my busy season, but I'd see what I could do. A couple
days later my mechanic came by to see what I had found.
"Well," I said, "I opened her up and took a look, and I'm
afraid you've got a little trouble there."

"Serious trouble?" he asked. 2

"Probably not too serious. The timing's off on four of 3
your six characters, and two of the others ought to be
replaced."

"Do you think I might be able to do the work myself?" 4
he asked.

I shrugged. "Don't know how handy you are," I said, 5
"or what tools you got. You own a thesaurus?"

"A what?" he asked. 6

"That's what I thought," I said. "No, I don't think you 7
ought to do the work yourself. You get it all apart, you might
not be able to put the pieces back together again."

"Maybe you could help me," he said. "I'd pay you, of 8
course."

"I'm not cheap—\$37.50 an hour. Plus parts." 9

"Parts?" 10

"You know—typing bond, carbon paper, typewriter rib- 11
bon, correction fluid, transparent tape—that kind of thing." I
scribbled an estimate on an index card. He looked at it and
whistled.

"Remember, that doesn't include syntax either," I said. 12

"Don't you think this is a little high?" he asked. I gave 13
him the names of a couple of my novelist friends and sug-
gested he get competitive bids. He said he didn't really know
their work and guessed he'd stick with me.

"When do you think I could pick the manuscript up?" 14
he asked. I told him to check with me in about a week.

One week later to the day, he dropped by. "Is it ready?" 15
he asked.

"Afraid not," I said. "Once I opened her up and really 16
took a hard look, I discovered a few more problems."

"Like what?" he asked. 17

"Well, for one thing," I said, "there's a lot of cheap im- 18
agery in there that ought to come out—similes, metaphors,
personifications—they're just clogging up the action. You also
have some defective aphorisms. Then there's a hole in your
plot about a mile wide that needs to be filled up. Plus which
your superstructure is rusty and falling apart."

He seemed really upset. "What about those two charac- 19
ters you said ought to be replaced?"

"I'm afraid it's worse than that," I said. "If it was me, 20
I'd replace all six of them. They're really shot. It's not just
their timing that's off, it's their motivations—you left out their
motivations when you hooked them up, and now I can't even
get them to turn over, much less speak."

"I can't afford to replace all six of them." 21

"Well, then, maybe they can be rebuilt," I said. "But 22
you definitely need to replace your protagonist."

“My protagonist?” he asked. 23

“I’m afraid so.” 24

He smiled sheepishly. “Look,” he said. “I’m not even 25
sure I know what a protagonist *is*.”

I pointed. “It’s this guy right here, see?” 26

“But why does he need to be replaced?” 27

“He’s weak. He’s not going to be able to go the dis- 28
tance. He’s going to give out in mid-plot, and when he does
he’s going to tear the hell out of the whole thing—it’ll be a real
mess.”

My mechanic looked a little queasy. I almost felt sorry 29
for him. “Listen,” I said, “I hate to have to be the bearer of
such bad news, but I figured you’d want to know the truth.
Another novelist might give you a different story, tell you all
you needed was a superficial tune-up—wider margins, a re-
type job, stuff like that—and just forget about your protago-
nist. But that’s not the way I operate.”

He nodded miserably. “How long before my protagonist 30
gives out?” he asked.

I shrugged. “Hard to say. Could be he’d last you all the 31
way up to the climax in the twelfth chapter. Could be he’d
give out in the first thirty pages. You just can’t tell with a
weak protagonist. If it was me, I’d pick up a new one, slap it
in there and be done with it.”

“How hard would it be to find one?” he asked. “A used 32
one, I mean. I don’t know if I can afford a new one.”

“Well,” I said, “a novelist I know has just scrapped a 33
trilogy he’s been working on. You could maybe make a deal
with him on *his* protagonist. In a piece that long, even a *minor*
character could work as a protagonist for you—after a little
customizing.”

“Could you give this guy a call and see if he’d be willing 34
to sell me a minor character? A protagonist from a work that
size has got to be out of my price range.”

“I’ll call him,” I said. “Of course, I don’t know how ea- 35
ger he’s going to be to cannibalize a whole trilogy to sell you
just one minor character.”

“Look,” he said, a pasty smile on his face, “maybe you 36
could ask for a special favor.”

“I could,” I said. “Unless...” 37

“Unless what?” 38

“Well,” I said, “unless you’ve ever done any work on 39
his car.”