

Common Mistakes Rookie Novelists Make



On Tuesday, May 18, the club was treated to a special presentation by Toni Lopopolo, a former Executive Editor of St. Martin's Press who has been a literary agent since 1991. (See accompanying article to discover why Toni was in town.) Her topic: "The Ten Most Common Mistakes First Novelists Make." Toni, who leads a series of boot camp workshops for fiction writers, told us that she got the idea for her list after reading the mountain of unsolicited—and mostly bad—novels that writers began sending to her after she opened her agency. She decided she needed to run her workshops, and to share the list below, to show new novelists what they don't yet know about writing.

Here's her list.

1. **Premature Submission.** Newbie Novelists (NNs) send in their manuscripts before they're ready, before the work has been vetted by a professional editor, or at least by a critique group.

2. **Failure to master the craft.** NNs have not yet developed the skills that make up the craft of writing book-length fiction: character development, charged dialogue, plot, pacing, setting, voice, POV (point of view).

3. **Vaguely drawn characters.** NNs do not know their characters well enough, and have neither filled out a character chart nor written a biography of the major characters in their novel. As Somerset Maugham said, "You can never know your characters well enough."

4. **Dull dialogue.** NNs do not realize that dialogue in fiction is nothing like dialogue in real life. Dialogue must sound like the way people really talk, only better, more interesting: i.e., charged. As Toni says, God made enough boring people. Don't put them in your novel.

5. **The Real-Life Oops.** NNs write from real life experience, but forget to include many significant details because they already see the real events in their

minds, and assume the reader will, too. NNs need to learn to embellish the truth when writing fiction. In other words: lie.

6. **Violation of point of view (POV).** NNs tend to jump from head to head, rather than sticking to one point of view per scene, or better yet, per chapter. Limiting the differing points of view intensifies the experience for the reader.

7. **Telling, not showing.** NNs often tell their story using blocks of narration, rather than show the reader by using action and dialogue to create scenes. Remember, dialogue and action, when used well, create tension.

8. **Overuse of adverbs, etc.** NNs tend to rely on adverbs, exclamation points, and italics to convey emotion. Emotion must come from the dialogue, the interior monologue, or the narrative. A well-chosen verb rarely needs an adverb, a well-written line rarely needs italics or exclamation marks.

9. **Poor self-editing skills.** NNs haven't learned to self edit by editing other writers' fiction, or by reading the recommended books.

10. **Not enough killing.** "Kill your darlings," as the saying goes. In other words, find the passages that slow your pace, and, no matter how much you like them or how well written you find them to be, delete them. Be brutal. Failure to do so brands you an NN.

Toni went on to offer a few more ways for writers to improve. She mentioned R.U.E. (resist the urge to explain). This can take many forms, but the most common is the adverb in the attribution: "I hate you!" she said angrily; "Take one more step and I'll shoot," he said menacingly; "I'm just so happy to see you," she said cheerily. Toni joined Elmore Leonard in cautioning against beginning your novel with weather, and to that she added poetic descriptions of the sun or the moon. She finished by answering questions such as how to find an agent (write a good query letter) and she defined the literary novel (the agony of moral choice). Toni also offered her Fiction Writers Character Chart to anyone who emails her and requests one. Her email address: Lopopolobooks@aol.com.

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