

## EXTREME FICTION MAKEOVERS

By E. F. Watkins

If you're at all serious about writing fiction, you accept the idea that rewriting comes with the territory. Even best-selling authors, such as Dean Koontz, admit to rewriting their books compulsively. And that's before an editor suggests any changes!

Usually, though, the process follows a certain rational pattern. You write something new, maybe just a rough draft. You set it aside for a while to get some psychological distance, then you rewrite it. You repeat as needed, until it's polished enough to send out to a magazine, agent or editor.

I do that with every novel, but I've also done something else. You could call it the Extreme Makeover rewrite.

I've been churning out book-length manuscripts for literal decades, and every once in a while, I'd pull out an old one and tackle it from a new angle. Many writers can't stand to revisit old ground this way. To me, though, it's a bit like running into an old boyfriend and remembering what you saw in him the first time around. (But more productive, because with a book I really can change the stuff I don't like anymore!)

I also have revived older stories for more practical reasons. After Amber Quill Press accepted my novel DANCE WITH THE DRAGON in 2003, I realized they probably would be just as

interested in other cross-genre, paranormal thrillers I'd had trouble placing with traditional houses. I pulled out BLACK FLOWERS, which had been sitting in my files for perhaps eight years, and had another go at it.

The greatest challenge there was updating the technology. Since BF deals with genetic engineering, I had to check out the latest advances and bring my research up to date. (I was delighted to learn that some British scientists had injected fluorescent genes into a mouse embryo to produce a live, glowing rodent--those who have read my book will understand why!) My well-to-do, technologically savvy characters also needed to make liberal use of their cell phones and computers, using software that wasn't as available in the mid-1990s. For instance, my weekly critique group pointed out that my heroine would no longer have to use the desk phone at an art gallery, during a gala reception, to call home and check on her kids!

After I succeeded in placing BF with Amber Quill, I tackled an even bigger challenge--my novel PARAGON, first written in the mid-1980s. I had updated that once already, in the '90s; since the actor-villain Eric is rather sexually active, I had added some mention of the potential threat of AIDS. This time around, I updated the technology used by the heroine in her job as an art director, and later in managing Eric's career.

On the other hand, I found doing research much easier in

2004. Where I used to have to buy a trade magazine or search for books in libraries to get inside information, now I could find almost anything I needed on the Web. Also, because PARAGON includes a bit of "medical horror," it helped that my critique group now includes a retired MD who helped me keep those gory details as realistic as possible.

Do you have a short story or book-length manuscript tucked away that might still have potential? Maybe an Extreme Makeover can give it new life and make it publishable.

Do you still care passionately about the story? If not, it's probably better to let it lie. On the other hand, you may reread it and find yourself thinking, "Hey, some of this is pretty good!" Here are a few tips to fix what might not be so good:

- \* Is the writing itself clichéd and pedestrian? Are you thinking, "I've gotten so much better since then"? Great! Then you've got the chops to finally whip it into shape.

- \* Does it deal with a social situation that has radically changed, such as prejudice against a certain group, the use of certain drugs or a trendy political movement? If so, can you still express your underlying theme while updating these details to suit the times?

- \* Check for pesky details that can date the manuscript. Sidewalk pay phones have virtually disappeared, now that so many

of us carry cell phones. Cops and private eyes spend more time digging up information on line these days than questioning people in person. And celebrities go in and out of style so quickly, it's safest to refer only to those who have become major, enduring icons.

\* If a modern lab would be able to establish early on that your killer left DNA at the crime scene, it could really screw up your 20-year-old plot. New legislation might alter the punishment of a crime, or even legalize something that was a crime in the past. Unless you're writing historical mysteries, better keep up on current events.

It's easy to overlook some of these details when you're trying to build a suspenseful plot and create colorful characters, so get a friend or critique group to help you catch any anachronisms.

Yes, it's a lot of work, but the results can be worth it. After all, some new scientific discovery or social movement could give you just the twist you need to revive your story and make it more compelling than ever.

Good luck!

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