



Hawkwood Books Blog : October 27th 2019

Wasted Words

I am often sent manuscripts with extraordinary amounts of padding. These are overused words and phrases which add nothing to the text, slow down the pace and bore the reader. The most common ones are, ‘then’, ‘smile(d)(s)(ing)’, ‘look(s)(ed)(ing)’, ‘suddenly’, ‘just’, ‘turn(ed)(ing)’. Here are some in context:

*They looked at each other and smiled
She smiled and he smiled back
She looked at him and they walked on
He turned to look at her
She turned to look at him and he half-smiled
Suddenly she looked at him, then he turned and ...*

You get the gist. I often check the count feature to see how many times such words have been used, and the totals are... well, not ‘amazing’, let’s say they highlight how difficult good writing can be. I can’t remember the record, but there are often many hundred instances. The author is describing what happens, but the reader does not need to know this. What’s needed is some original thought with language that will push the reader on, not make them lay down the book, never to be picked up again. There are alternatives, but often these wasted words can simply be cut – the remaining part of the sentence will make just as much sense and shift the story on faster.

They are an indication of lazy thinking. A lecturer at my university once criticised an essay of mine in that way, and it hurt, but it was a good lesson to learn. The idea that every written word carries weight is scary because it means you have to consider each one, and for many of us, this is too onerous a task. One solution is to kick the habit in the first place. As soon as you feel a ‘then’ or a ‘looked’ coming on, push it aside and find another way to say what you want to say, or say something else.

As trivial as this whole subject may seem at first, words change the way we think, the way we feel and therefore the way we shape our world. Imagine, for example, the reduced impact of religious thought and deed, both the sublime and the severe, had the Book of Genesis opened thus:

Suddenly, just after the beginning, God looked, smiled a half-smile to himself, turned and then created the heavens and the Earth.