

## 1. The Proofreader: Wendy Janes

We acknowledge that reading a book with any sense of commitment forms a bond between author and reader, but we scarcely consider another special relationship, that between proofreader and reader. As Wendy Janes says, “The proofreader is the last person to fully read the book before it’s printed,” imparting a sense of ‘handing the book on’ to the reader. It’s a relationship dependent on an infinite capacity for taking pains, and is largely disregarded until a disturbance – a missed typo, an ignored literal – intervenes. A proofreader’s efficiency or otherwise can decide the fate of a book for a reader, regardless of its literary merit, a dose of bad proofreading being liable to provoke howling at the moon and the biting of ankles.

Wendy Janes has been a proofreader getting on for six years and her appetite for the job shows in her demeanour. Shortly after I arrived at her home in south-east London, a new assignment was delivered, a set of proofs plus the copy-edited typescript. She swiftly appraised her task, “150 pages . . . Twenty hours of work,” and straightaway spotted an error in the Contents list, a capital letter not in the copy-edited typescript had strayed into the proof. “Another thing about Contents lists,” she warned, “always check that the chapters actually do start on the pages they’re meant to.” Her eagerness to knuckle down, to get into those pages, was palpable – a greyhound in the slips, straining upon the start.

“I have three children, so I wanted a job I could do at home. I loved reading, and I used to be a teacher so” – a broad grin – “there was that red pen waiting to be used.” She responded to an ad for Chapterhouse, a company teaching proofreading and editing skills, and signed up for the home-study course. “In proofing,” she discovered, “the fundamental question is: Is it right or wrong?”

After completing the course (with a “nice mark”), she set about finding work. “My advice is, when you’re starting out, don’t go for the obvious, the big fiction houses; try the non-fiction – maybe less well-known houses.” As a teacher – of English, Drama and History – Wendy had immediately defined areas of specialisation. Later, because her son has autism, she read up on the subject and added that knowledge to her portfolio. (She stressed that she must “feel competent” about any proofing work she takes on: no point in accepting “anything about, say, accountancy, or any book that depends on a substantial use of foreign languages.”)

“It’s a nine to three-ish sort of day, five days a week” – which allows her time for her husband and children. “But if there’s too



Wendy Janes with (on her right) the copy-edited manuscript and (on her left) the proofs waiting to be read.

much to do, it’s evenings and weekends as well. I did it part-time when I started, because I was a classroom assistant. But I decided proofreading was more fun – sometimes,” she joked. “Juggling a number of publishers at once can be tricky.” She spoke with the wisdom of experience. (When I met her she was working with four.)

“Let the eye guide the mind,” she advised, because the mind has a tendency to anticipate and presume. “Keep a watch on titles and headings.” She cited one of her first tests as a student proofreader: “I’d done everything in the body of the text correctly but completely missed a spelling mistake in the heading.” Likewise, “watch out that words on the end of lines are not duplicated at the start of the next. It’s easy for an ‘and and’ or a ‘that that’ to slip through.

“Consistency is really what I’m looking for,” she declared, consistency based on her knowledge and intuition, and formalised by the ‘house styles’ of individual publishers. If – for example – ‘ised’ (as in ‘specialised’) is preferred to ‘ized’, make sure that it is consistent. The same goes for Head Teacher/head teacher or *et al/et al* or Mr/Mister or 8.00pm/8pm . . . etc, etc.

“Consistency and Continuity”: the mantra applies to all the tasks done by a proofreader. The weeding out of misspellings, misprints, misused homophones, and ensuring that pages (and page-numbers) are sequential, running headings are in place, illustrations correctly captioned, names properly spelt, ellipses do not exceed three dots. In fact, all those tasks undertaken, as Wendy put it, to “help the book flow, to aid the reader’s understanding and pleasure.”

Not that all proofreading jobs are the same. Plays, for instance, have a particular set of considerations. “For one thing, being in dialogue,” Wendy explained, “the ways in which characters speak may be idiosyncratic, ungrammatical, so the usual rules don’t necessarily apply. I once went to the reading of a play I’d proofread, and one of the actors stumbled over a word. Oh god! I thought, did I leave out that comma?”

If, when the proofreading has been completed, “I still consider there’s something not quite right with the grammar or the coherence, I let the publisher know. And perhaps suggest another way of phrasing the passage. I’m too embarrassed to ask the author directly. Although,” she confided, “when I feel I can ask directly, I love being able to speak to authors.

“Whenever I see the finished book – I don’t always, by any means – but when I do see the book on the shelf, I feel proud.”

Chris Stephenson