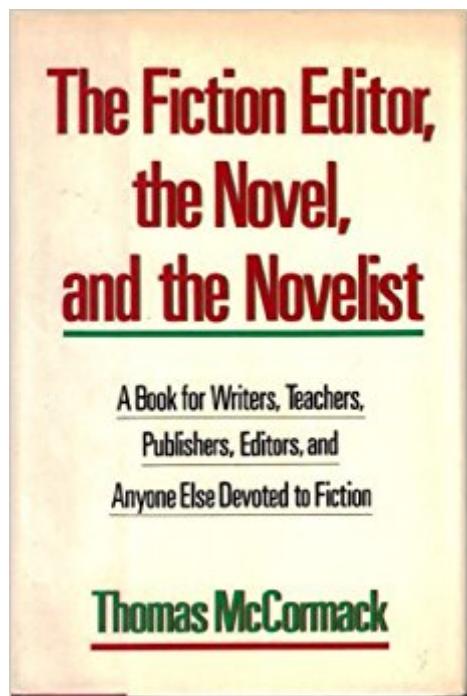


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# The Fiction Editor



## **Synopsis**

This book talks about how to plan, write and revise a novel. It describes the sensibility and art required, and it conveys concrete, practical elements of craft. It details how to structure the novel, choose the characters, drive the story, diagnose narrative ailments, and find and apply specific remedies. McCormack is constructive at every level--from individual word choice, up to the over-arching total effect of the novel. Included in full are the author's often-excerpted attack on the notion of "theme" and his innovative analysis of the act of art itself. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

The chairman and editorial director of St. Martin's discusses the art of editing fiction. Copyright 1994 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

This breezy little book illuminates the normally private relationship between author and editor. In prose that is opinionated, brash, and forceful, McCormack lays bare the principles he has applied for 30 years as a fiction editor. While admitting the need for sensibility, he denounces seat-of-the-pants editing, substituting instead a systematic method of analyzing stories and repairing their faults before publication. In a conversational and light-hearted tone, he offers insights that will interest not just writers and editors of fiction but also anyone who wants to understand what makes a novel succeed or fail. Perfect for teachers, critics, and general readers as well.- Michael Edmonds, State Historical Soc. of Wisconsin, MadisonCopyright 1989 Reed Business Information, Inc.

There is a lot of really useful information in McCormack's book. In particular, I found two notions to be quite helpful: the notion of "circuitry," which details how one character's motivations and agendas connect with those of others; and the notion of "master effect," the overall impact the author wants to achieve. There were a number of other useful things, too, along the way. However, in general, the book lacks the unity and cohesiveness needed to make it a really effective teaching tool. The first three sections each deal with a different aspect of fiction editing, along with three characteristics of the competent fiction editor: sensibility, craft, and art. In Part One, we are told that sensibility - an intuitive understanding of what will work or not work for readers - is key, yet in Part Three, we are told that sensibility can't be taught. And then, he spends several pages dissecting this unteachable concept of sensibility (why? - if it can't be taught). Likewise, art cannot be taught, he claims, yet in Part Three he analyzes "artful writing" into four distinct stages. On one page McCormack speaks directly to writers, on the next, to editors. He piles metaphor against metaphor, sometimes in the same paragraph, and sometimes spinning out the metaphor at length rather than focusing on how it illuminates editing or writing. He indulges in irrelevant asides on such diverse topics as theatre and philosophy; quotes William Sloane and E. M. Forster without identifying the sources of the quote; and chooses arcane terms with no intuitive appeal - prelibation, gustatory sensibility vs. salivary sensibility (!) - to capture his insights. Moreover, any number of sentences barely make sense ("The word 'narrative' is usually used to mean the lamination of things imagined and the words used to describe them."). Moreover, the book is overburdened by what McCormack is AGAINST, specifically, almost all fiction editors, almost all introductory texts on literature, and a number of well-respected fiction writers vis a vis their opinions on writing. He spends 17 pages - one-tenth of the entire book! - denouncing the use of theme as a tool to teach literature, and another 12 pages on the topic of trigger (whatever initially motivates the writer to write), only to conclude that it doesn't really matter what the trigger is, only what the writer does with it. And this in a book less than 170 pages long! The result is a book that risks sinking under the weight of its own author. As a career (non-fiction) editor myself, I understand the desire to shape one's own experience as an editor and pass that wisdom along to others. But this book would have been far more effective if McCormack had listened to his own editors (per his final chapter). There is gold to be found, here, but the reader will have to process a lot of slurry to find it.

I am an editor, and I'd like to think I'm a good one. In my effort to become a great one as I embarked on a publishing venture, I chose this book to start, and I'm glad I did. This book is not for a writer

looking for a successful editor telling him/her how to get published. It's also not for someone who wants a quick weekend read: this book is deceptively breezy and short; its concepts are colossal and profound. This book is for sincerely, passionately dedicated writers and editors who want to understand the role of art and science in evaluating and improving story. From McCormack's initial question (What is the author's intended effect on the target audience?), he proceeds to his premise that the editor's job is to help the author achieve his/her intended effect. This requires both an artistic/creative sensibility (to determine if there are problems in the manuscript) as well as an analytical/craft-oriented ability (to determine where and what those problems are). Diagnosis suggests elements of the book to put in and leave out while acknowledging that craft alone is insufficient as a solution: craft does not (cannot) \*create\* art, but it can (and does) \*enable\* art.

I was so glad to see that this book has been revised and reprinted. I came upon it early in my career as a novelist and altho it wasn't an easy book to read (I was still pretty naive), it turned out to be one of the most important ones on craft for me. His idea of the "master-effect" became a sort of mantra for me, first as a writer, and now as a teacher. If you don't know what you want the book to DO or MEAN for the reader, what will it do? What he gives you--circuitously--is a way to catch onto something for the wonderful ride it is to write a novel. The book is not for someone looking for a quick fix, a formula, etc. It's a thinker's book. It's fun, though. And really smart

I bought the book on the recommendation of an editor I was working on my novel. Realized too late she had a vested interest. After a few pages into the books, I found readability, the fluency of language and the inability to stick to one idea till it was completely expounded, were the problems. Having read books like 'The Artful Edit,' 'Self-Editing for Fiction Writers,' two books by Sol Stein, I realized this book isn't going to help me as much as others did. I wonder whether this book was edited by any other editor.

As a writer of short fiction, I'm always interested in discovering some new storytelling gem. This book uncovers a few. This is one editor's attempt to layout the foundation for a means of instructing an editor. However, if you're an author looking to improve your craft, this book presents an opinionated means of evaluating and considering good fiction. Not as structured as I would like, but overall the book works to deliver an overview of an editing practice.

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