

**Holly:** [00:00:00] Hi, you are listening to the Indie Bookshelf Podcast with me, Holly,

**Aimee:** and me Amy,

**Holly:** as we champion the indie book industry from independent authors and publishers to independent bookshops. We have a range of literary discussions and book recommendations to indulge your love for all things bookish. In today's episode, we'll discuss developmental editing.

What is it? Why it matters? And what it looks like from both an editorial and an author perspective. Yes. We'll be looking behind the scenes for the publishing world to show you this crucial step in making a manuscript into a book. So make ourselves comfortable and let's dive right in. Wonderful. Well, I think Amy, as you are the commissioning editor of a stereo press, really, I should hand over straight to you to. Help define what, what is developmental editing? You know, if for [00:01:00] somebody who maybe has never come across the term or who's interested in different types of editing, how would you sum up developmental editing to someone?

**Aimee:** Yes. Uh, developmental editing is the first stage of editing. Uh, but it's not the first thing that's done to a book and I'll, I'll circle back to that.

Um, but what we look at is, uh, everything, all of the book building blocks of. Uh, writing craft and writing theory. Um, so we look at whether the plot is tight and the pacing and your characterization. Uh, and essentially it's a, it's a guided revision of the manuscript to make it something that a is the best version of what it can be.

Um, if it's for a wider audience, you might, uh, look at trying to make it commercially viable. Um, by, by which I mean. Meets reader expectations, um, [00:02:00] especially reader expectations of genre. Um, so yes. Yeah, it, it goes through and systematically, uh, analyzes and critiques all of the different building blocks that make up a manuscript.

Um, and I said I'd circle back to it not being the first thing that's done to a, a book book. Um, typically. Developmental edits aren't done on first draft. Uh, first drafts are often what the authors use to get to know their story, and then you, they can go off and write a second draft and it, you know, it will be better by itself because the author knows what they're trying to say now.

Um, and generally speaking, other people, other human beings have read it before you go to developmental editing stages. Um, So you get your manuscript as as good as possible on your own, and then you get professional pair of eyes in to do all of these analysis, analysis and [00:03:00] critiques. That's a really helpful definition actually.

**Holly:** I think sort of just pulling out a few of the different elements from that. There's something about having a professional pair of eyes and developmental editing being something that you know, your average reader. Or your average friend won't be able to do. There's something skilled about it. It's, it's about having that professional editing expertise look into a manuscript, but also that sense of, you know, it's about the big picture, it's about the building blocks.

We're not looking at word choices here, um, or sort of paragraph sentence structure. We're looking at genre plot and, and reader expectations. And I think it was really interesting. One of the phrases you used was this, the commercial. Aspect of a book. And I think that from a, an authorial perspective, often the first manuscript isn't always written with a commercial, um, knowledge or with a commercial even aim in mind.

Really. Sometimes it's done for your own pleasure, [00:04:00] offer somebody you love. And so having that pair of eyes that knows the commercial book scene and the industry as a whole and is able to. Yeah, look at the manuscript with that lens, I think is a really crucial part of developmental editing. So yeah, you've brought up quite a lot there.

And I think things that don't always get pulled out in, let's say, I've looked at a few blog posts for this in preparation for this and, and some of those aspects weren't actually pulled out in those, which I think are really key to developmental editing. So thank you for that. Um, I wonder sort of just leading on from that, What would you say is like the importance of developmental editing?

Or in other words, why does developmental editing matter?

**Aimee:** Great question. Um, I think you've answered it in part, um, that developmental editing matters is because I think the majority of good books I've read were, were not written with an audience in mind. Um, the strongest books that I've [00:05:00] come across, They were written entirely for the author.

Um, I think what makes a a book really, really good is that the author is invested and passionate about what they're writing at, about, regardless of, you

know, what anyone else thinks. When you're writing for yourself, you don't, you're ultimately not considering other people. So getting, uh, developmental edit takes what you are passionate about and helps convey that passion to a wider audience.

Um, the other reason why developmental editing is really important is because you are not writing with this, oh, I'm gonna cut all of that. The other reason why developmental editing is really important is because when you're writing, you are getting your your story out and you're getting the words on the page.

But what you're not necessarily thinking about is. What [00:06:00] parts are the, the core to the story. And you can end up being lost in extraneous details and taking little detours to explore those. Um, and you might pay far more attention to one character and completely ignore another. So you have a character that might not be as developed.

Um, and when you reread your book, you. Know exactly what you were trying to say, and you know exactly the, the moods and tones and themes that you were putting into your book because you put them there. What you can't do yourself is read it from a fresh perspective and know how, how those themes and tones are actually being conveyed.

Um, so part of developmental, developmental editing is getting to know what the author was intending. I'm really pulling that out and strengthening it. [00:07:00] I really love that actually. Um, and I think that's a beautiful way from which to approach editing. Um, and there's something about, yeah, being able to convey that passion and, and transform something from somebody, something somebody's made.

Potentially for themselves or has a vision for, and, and being able to transform that into something which will inspire other people and, and get other people on board with the vision and the, and the aims that the author is trying to get across. And I think I sort of wanna add on to why does developmental editing matter from an author perspective?

**Holly:** Um, currently working on my developmental edits from the report I've received, um, I can see how much of a difference it makes. To the quality of the writing and to the quality of the book. Um, I've decided to do a complete rewrite, um, because there were many plot recommendations from my developmental editing feedback.[00:08:00]

And so, but I can, I'm excited about the book already because I can already see how much stronger that book is going to get. And I think this is where, you know, The manuscript I, I first wrote, well, not that the manuscript I handed in was my first draft, but there's something about this book going through multiple processes of editing and revision, which is crucial to making it from that manuscript into a book.

And so when you as the reader, finally get this book and get to read, get to read it, it's, it's a completely different. Uh, I wanna say work of art to what it first was. It's almost like, I imagine it a bit like, you know, if you have a sculptor who's, who's sculpting something from a giant piece of stone, and it's almost like the first draft.

You chip away at the, the outside bits, the piece of stone. Maybe you get a, a rough idea of the shape of the creature you're gonna do. And then the [00:09:00] second draft, you, you go in, you make it much more defined and, and it suddenly becomes much more recognizable as whatever the creature is. And then you get the developmental editor in and suddenly, You get shown where like the leg is a bit wonky or the tail isn't quite right, or like the, the proportions are wrong and, and you can work on that.

And, and every single round of that sculpting process refines the piece into what it truly was from this big hunk of sculpting material, otherwise known as rock.

I've just made Amy laugh. It might be ice. I don't know. Maybe that's a strange metaphor, but that's kind of how I see it. I like that metaphor. That was really good. Put me on a journey.

What does, um, developmental editing look like from your perspective as an editor, Amy?

**Aimee:** Ooh, really, really lame and nerdy.[00:10:00]

I put that on a quote on our Instagram. Absolutely. Yes, you can. Um, I'll walk you through my process, um, because I have refined it specifically to work with me and my brain. I think whenever you speak to different editors, they'll all have a different, different process. But my process is I read the whole manuscript and I do that taking notes for each chapter.

Really, really brief ones, genuinely just down to what happens. And when I say what happens, I mean like the actions, the, the plot beats. Um, so not, not a summary of each chapter, but like the core, uh, where it fits into plot. Um, and

for some chapters nothing happens from that perspective And for other chapters, you know, serial four things happen.

Um, and then [00:11:00] I, once I've done reread reading the whole thing, um, I might also have taken some, like other notes, asking myself questions to go and check back, or, um, things that I think will be gen, generally applicable, uh, that I need to remember to put into the report later on. Um, and then I go and put all of my plot points, not my plot points.

The plot points into a spreadsheet, and this is where I get through a lame, so they all go into a spreadsheet, and that is when I start my second read through, and that's where I'm paying attention to the other building blocks and starting to make notes on them and get an idea. And I do this read through a bit quicker because.

I already know the story and who wants to read the same book back to back twice. Some people, uh, but not me. So my second readthrough is a bit quicker. And I, uh, focus, I have [00:12:00] a checklist of all the different, uh, things that I need to pull out as I'm reading. And I'll take notes about each thing under each one.

Um, for example, If I'm focusing on setting, I might take notes of the different types of settings, especially if there's a, a large variation and the maybe the kind of language used to describe the setting. Um, really I'm looking for key strength for a number of the, a number of the different, uh, elements.

Because we can't just focus on the negatives. And then I'm also looking for everything that needs to work. Uh, so that looks different for every manuscript that you do. Um, and some manuscripts I won't pay very much mind setting because, you know, overall it might be done well. Uh, whereas others I might, uh, draw [00:13:00] out quotes and um, thoughts as I'm doing the second read through.

And then the final step is to write up the report. And that, uh, working from a template, I, uh, write in each section all of these positives and negatives that, uh, I come across throughout the, throughout my readings and talk about how each can be improved and where these improvements need to happen. Um, and then for some books, I might do some work in the manuscript with notes.

And again, that depends on the author and how they're going to approach things. So you did a complete rewrite and that might not have been very helpful for you, for me to be writing a note on a paragraph that you know isn't going to

exist at all. Whereas other write the other writers are more likely to revise their existing manuscript.

And a, a note in their manuscript is [00:14:00] gonna be more helpful cause they'll just edit the words. They're already there. Um, So there's a vague kind of flow of how it looks, and then it gets personalized to the authors and the manuscripts. Mm-hmm. No, that's, that's really interesting and it's, it's lovely to hear your process as well.

**Holly:** There's something I always find it really special sort of hearing about how people go about just doing the work because. It's, it's not obvious how editing works from, as somebody who isn't a professional editor and hasn't been trained in it. Um, it's, it's really, really interesting. So, so thank you for that.

I wonder, um, what, what is it you enjoy most about developmental editing? Or, or is that actually a part of the process you're not a fan of and you much prefer other types of editing? I actually think that developmental editing is my favorite client, uh, because it's a really big creative puzzle. And it could be really [00:15:00] easy.

**Aimee:** I mean, copy edits for me aren't the most thrilling part. I know some people that really, really enjoy them, and that's all they do, but for me, they're, they're, they're fine. You need to have them. Um, and there's line editing, which that varies wildly depending on the author, um, and the, the text. Um, and I do enjoyed that.

Because you get to tease out like these specific language, but there's something about that big picture puzzle and being able to, to see, like you said, as a, as a reader, you can't necessarily vocalize or have the language or knowledge or context to say why a book didn't work for you. But being able to like go into a manuscript and finding the exact point where it clicks, um, is just, is thrilling.

[00:16:00] And yeah, I have really liked developmental editing for that reason.

**Holly:** Mm-hmm. Oh, that's really lovely to hear. That's really cool. We are actually, um, I'm part of a book club and um, we were actually chatting, we were discussing this, uh, book the other week. It's called The Night Circus, by the way. It's absolutely brilliant.

Gonna give it five star recommendation from me. Um, bit of magical realism for you and somebody who is in the group said, it's really interesting because I know whether or not I like a book, but I dunno why. And it's really hard to

articulate my thoughts about a book more than, oh, that was really great, or, eh, didn't really sit well with me.

Um, and yeah, it's, it's interesting how we as readers, even readers who, you know, read hundreds of books and absolutely love. Buying and reading and have, I've read tons and you know, are very experienced in reading and yet the language [00:17:00] about how to analyze books and understand why and how things click for us or not isn't always there, which is really fascinating.

Actually, we should do a podcast on that.

**Aimee:** That's complicated, but we can do it.

Yes. So I've done a lot of talking now. Uh, so tell me what developmental, so tell me what developmental editing looks like from an author's perspective.

**Holly:** Cool. Yeah. Um, so I'm a writer and author, and. Obviously developmental editing looks very different from, from my perspective than it does from Amy's as a commissioning editor.

Um, and so I thought it would be quite interesting just to sort of let you know what happens once, once an author has received that developmental editing report. [00:18:00] Um, what does that look like, feel like? And, and how does that process look like of developmental, working on the developmental edits? Um, so what it looks like for me is first of all a whole bunch of anxiety as I wait for this manuscript to be edited.

Um, and not knowing how it's going to be. It's almost like sending off, like I imagined sending off your child like primary school for the first time, being like, well, they like my book, will he make friends and waiting to get this feedback. Um, and. And then you, and then you get the report, it aligns in your inbox.

And for me it was such a joyful experience. Um, now this is partially because Amy is a fantastic editor. Um, but actually there was something about having that professional feedback, which was just. Really huge, um, as somebody who's publishing their first book and getting to see, you know, the strengths and getting to [00:19:00] see the weaknesses.

And some of them were things I'd already identified and some of them were things that, um, I hadn't necessarily identified or thought about. And in the report were various recommendations about how to go about putting in place

the suggestions that were made. And so a couple of them in particular were super helpful in terms of just the practicalities of knowing how to work on something that's quite broad.

Brush strokes, such as the plot needs tightening. Well, how do you do that? Um, and so actually having a. A little spreadsheet example of how you could go about doing that and what the, the standard plot points are in, let's say a murder mystery, which I didn't know what the standard plot points were. And so getting to, to have that and then track out my own plot in relation to that was really, really helpful.

Um, so it was really exciting getting this report back and just getting, getting to see the manuscript, getting to, to grips with the feedback, both positive and the suggestions for improvement. And I [00:20:00] think what really helped me was I'd had a bit of a gap between submitting the manuscript for editing and receiving it back again.

So I had about three and a half months between the two, and that was actually really healthy because it meant when I came back to the manuscript to work on it, I did so from a place of some emotional distance. I wasn't feeling like it was an attack. I mean, editing is never an attack, but it's obvious if you're gonna have.

Critiques on something you've spent months or years working on that, that's not always gonna be easy to take. And so having that emotional distance really helped because actually I was then looking at it with a different set of eyes as well. Um, and then the next stage for me was just the planning stage.

So it's almost going back to how am I going to. Put these edits into practice without diving straight into the manuscript. It's okay. Well, I'm gonna now take a big, big picture look and almost do my own developmental edit, taking the feedback I've [00:21:00] received and then adding in things that maybe, there were a couple of things which the report made me think I wanted to do, which I hadn't, hadn't actually been written in the report, but were just ideas that were sparked by the feedback itself.

Um, so I then almost do a little developmental edit of my own deciding what it is, um, I want to put in place. Um, one of the things I decided to do was create a master spreadsheet with a murder mystery timeline, color coded suspect lists, um, and go through a chapter breakdown at the plot. Um, and completely changed everything so that there were no excess scenes.



So every scene had a purpose, had a plot purpose. Um, and did something to either advance the character on plot very directly. Um, and also the, the thr, the three different subplots that go inside the main plot all were weaving. You didn't have like three chapters spent on one and then two chapters spent on another.

But they, they [00:22:00] all weave, weave, move, move. I don't, I can't word they all, they all, they all kind of came together and, and there was that feeling of. They were each being progressed simultaneously. Um, rather than it feeling a bit stoppy starty with various plot subplots happening quicker than others. Um, and then I started my rewrite.

So for me, on this occasion, I decided to do a complete rewrite. That's partially a personality thing. I'm somebody who likes a fresh page and finds it easier doing that than tweaking what is already there if it's quite a big structural thing. Um, but it's also because. Yeah, with the, with the particular recommendations in this report, that was the, the route I decided to go down.

Um, so it'll be a complete rewrite and then a quick sort of brush up and, and edit through that before sending it back. Um, so re really, it's just really exciting actually from an author's perspective because you are, you are watching the next [00:23:00] stage of your story emerge, and you are watching it literally be transformed in, in my eyes, from something that feels more.

Amateur to something more professional. Or perhaps if we are using the, the analogy Amy used earlier, maybe something that was more for myself and seeing it become more commercial and seeing it transform from Holly's manuscript into a published book, um, that other people will love to read, at least. I hope so.

So that's kind of how it looks like from, from an author's perspective.

**Aimee:** I really love that. Um, so the feedback that I got from Holly when I sent this, this report over, and to be honest, it was nervous, nerve-wracking for me as well. Um, sending a report over that, you know, by and large is, here are all the things that you can do better is a bit stressful cuz you don't want people to come away feeling dejected.

My [00:24:00] goal is to. Give people more enthusiasm to go and work, work on their book again. And that was the feedback that I got from Holly when I sent it. So yeah, developmental editing, it's all good.

**Holly:** It's better be a good thing, I think both from an editing and from an author's perspective. And, um, And it's a really positive part of the process, and I love what you say, Amy, and that it, it's still a very creative part of the process, whereas maybe further edits feel more analytical and slightly more, um, if I'm gonna say teacher lens or editor lens.

This one still feels like you, you're generating new content and, and creating something from it still, which is quite exciting. Um, So yes, if you are an editor or an author, um, and you have [00:25:00] been in the process of developmental editing, we would love to hear from you. Please do, uh, like, comment, um, go check us out on our various social medias and, and let us know what your experience of developmental editing is.

So, You can find us on Facebook at Asteria Press, um, on Instagram, also at Asteria Press. You can find us at on Twitter at press asteria and our master atia press sadan.com. Oh, you smashed those. Woo. Nice. So bit the news for news from us is we are off to the London Book Fair on the 18th to the 20th of April, representing Asteria Press.

So if you are there, please come and find us. We'll give you a bookmark. We'll give you a bookmark. It's very exciting. Um, and yeah. Um, we'll be back in a fortnight with our next podcast, debunking the myth that indie books are worse than traditionally published books. [00:26:00] Nice bit of a controversial topic for us there.

Yes, let us know your thoughts. Until next time. Until next time, keep reading.