

**Dialogue
&
The Art Of War**

by Randy Ingermanson

compiled by Bryce Beattie

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About the Author:

Award-winning novelist Randy Ingermanson, "the Snowflake Guy," publishes the Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine, with more than 6000 readers, every month. If you want to learn the craft and marketing of fiction, AND make your writing more valuable to editors, AND have FUN doing it, visit <http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com>. Download your free Special Report on Tiger Marketing and get a free 5-Day Course in How To Publish a Novel.

Compiler's note: This special report was assembled (with permission) from issues of Randy Ingermanson's terrific "Advanced Fiction Writing" e-zine. It is a wonderful source of information and ideas for new and experienced writers alike. I highly suggest you check it out.

Dialogue & The Art Of War -- Part 1

If you write fiction, then you have probably gone through a stage where you tried your best to make your dialogue sound like Real Conversation.

The problem is that Real Conversation is boring! Go ahead. Test me on this. Next time you're in the subway or on the bus or in line at the supermarket, eavesdrop on the conversations around you. If you're listening in on teenage girls, you'll get something like this:

"And then he said, 'No way!' And I'm like, 'Yes way.'"

"No!"

"Yeah!"

"So whatcha gonna do?"

"I dunno."

We interrupt this wretched Real Conversation now, before you die of sleep apnea. Let's tune in now on two middle-aged guys talking sports:

"Could be the year for the Dodgers."

"Yeah, maybe. If they can get a decent #4 in their pitching rotation."

"Ain't gonna happen. They'll have to do it with hitting."

"So whaddaya think about the steroid thing?"

"Terrible. The commissioner shoulda done something ten years ago."

Again, this Real Conversation works better than Sominex at putting you out. If your fiction sounds like this kind of Real Conversation, then you are slitting your novel's throat.

So what's a writer to do?

Well, duh! It's obvious! Don't write Real Conversation. Write Dialogue!

You'll notice that I just capitalized the word Dialogue. I didn't capitalize it at the beginning of this article, but I capitalized it here. I did that to make it clear that in this context it is an RTT (Randy's Technical Term). The term Real Conversation is also an RTT.

I better define those two RTTs. Real Conversation is that informational sort of back-and-forth that you saw in the two snippets above. There is no conflict in Real Conversation, and that's the problem. Fiction is about conflict. More precisely, fiction is about characters in conflict.

Now I'll say it again: Don't write Real Conversation. Write Dialogue.

Real Conversation is RARELY about conflict. Think about the Real Conversations you've had lately. You'll find they fall into various boring categories like these:

- a) People making small talk to pass the time.
- b) People exchanging information.
- c) People avoiding conflict.
- d) People trying to solve a problem.

Why are these boring? Simple. Look for the conflict in each one:

Small talk has zero conflict. Don't put small talk into your fiction!
It's a killer.

Exchanging information also usually has no conflict. If one of the parties is trying to HIDE information, then there is conflict. If you MUST write a Dialogue in which information gets exchanged, then make the informer do his best to avoid informing the informee.

Avoiding conflict also has no conflict, unless you subtext the conflict. See, for example, just about any scene in PRIDE AND PREJUDICE. If you like subtexted conflict (and I do), you'll love Jane Austen.

There CAN be conflict when people are trying to solve a problem, depending on whether the problem is easy or hard (and whether one of the players isn't too keen on the getting the problem solved). If you're going to solve a problem in Dialogue, then make it a nasty, vicious, horrible problem. Or make one of the players an obstructionist who would find it disastrous for the problem to actually BE solved.

The strange thing is that every author is tempted to put some Real Conversation into their novel, especially early in the story before the characters have figured out what the conflict is about. There's a remarkable example of deadly dull Real Conversation in RED STORM RISING, by Tom Clancy and Larry Bond.

The book opens with an exciting sequence in which Islamic terrorists destroy a Soviet oil refinery, drastically cutting Soviet oil production (and eventually leading up to World War III). Meanwhile, over in the US, we meet Our Hero, Bob Toland, who hasn't quite figured out that he's the star of an international bestseller yet. Bob is engaging in some truly wretched Real Conversation, which I quote here verbatim:

Bob Toland frowned at his spice cake. I shouldn't be eating dessert, the intelligence analyst reminded himself. But the National Security Agency commissary served this only once a week, and spice cake was his favorite, and it was only about two hundred calories. That was all. An extra five minutes on the exercise bike when he got home.

"What did you think of that article in the paper, Bob?" a co-worker asked.

"The oil-field thing?" Toland rechecked the man's security badge. He wasn't cleared for satellite intelligence. "Sounds like they had themselves quite a fire."

"You didn't see anything official on it?"

"Let's just say that the leak in the papers came from a higher security clearance than I have."

"Top Secret--Press?" Both men laughed.

"Something like that. The story had information that I haven't seen," Toland said, speaking the truth, mostly. The fire was out, and people in his department had been speculating on how Ivan had put it out so fast. "Shouldn't hurt them too bad. I mean, they don't have millions of people taking to the road on summer vacations, do they?"

"Not hardly. How's the cake?"

"Not bad." Toland smiled, already wondering if he needed the extra time on the bike.

Randy sez: Oh, Lordy, Lordy! Spice cake? Exercise bike? Where is a mean old editor with a blue pencil when you need him? This Real Conversation sucks, to be perfectly blunt. There is no Dialogue here, no conflict. There is a hint

that maybe Toland knows something that he's not telling, but it's so far submerged that it's useless.

I remember reading this book when it first came out. The first scenes read so fast I could hardly flip the pages fast enough. Then I got to this scene and WHACK! It felt like I was swimming in sand. There is NOTHING go on here! Spice cake? An overweight NSA analyst? Journalist jokes? Please, Tom, give us some Dialogue here!

And what's the cure for this scene, you may be asking? Simple. Cut it. There is no hope for a scene like this. No conflict. No opposing interests. No nothing. Neither character really gives a rip about this dialogue, so why should the reader? Scissor this monstrosity right out of the manuscript and you have a better novel.

Luckily for Tom, he already had about a billion fans from his previous book, THE HUNT FOR RED OCTOBER. Plus this novel began with some serious zing. But what if this was Tom's first novel? What if he'd started out the book with this Real Conversation? Poor Tom would have sunk like an Elbonian sub.

Let me say it straight. Dialogue is war. There is never an excuse for writing Real Conversation that has no conflict in it. Such informational tripe is not Dialogue. Slash it.

Don't get me wrong. It's perfectly legitimate to write Dialogue that ALSO transmits information or reveals character or backstory or the story world. But all Dialogue had better have conflict in it FIRST. That means two characters talking who have opposing interests.

If you look at the Real Conversation above, you see that that's exactly what's missing. Bob Toland's interest is the spice cake. (And how pitiful is that?) The unnamed co-worker's interest is to make small talk about the fire,

which he doesn't think is serious. (And how much more pitiful is that?) These are different interests, but they are not in opposition. No conflict. No Dialogue.

If you're Tom Clancy, you can get away with this (except that you will still be mocked in the Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine if you write this badly). But you aren't Tom. Neither am I. Write Dialogue, not Real Conversation.

Dialogue & The Art Of War -- Part 2

Dialogue, as I said last month, is war. It's not fought with guns and tanks. It's fought with words. But it's all about the same thing. Conflict. If you don't have conflict, then you don't have dialogue.

Dialogue, by the way, is a series of a special kind of MRU, in which rational speech figures more prominently than normal. (If you've never heard of MRUs, then you can find out all about them in the following article on my web site:) http://www.rsingermanson.com/html/perfect_scene.html

Last month, I gave an example of poor dialogue by a writer we'll call "Tom Clancy." This month, just to show that I'm a fair-minded guy, we'll work through an example of sharp and snappy dialogue, and we'll call this writer "Tom Clancy" too. It's a common name, after all.

This excerpt is from the book PATRIOT GAMES. The setting is the UK in the early 1980s. Our hero, Jack Ryan, is in London on holiday and just happens to see an assassination attempt in progress against Prince Charlie and Lady Di. The bad guys are some IRA terrorists armed with grenades and AK-47s. Jack barges in barehanded and foils the attempt, wounding one of the terrorists and killing another, thereby saving the royals. For this service to the crown, he is given an honorary knighthood.

In the scene we'll be analyzing, Jack is the star witness in the trial of the terrorist he wounded. He's given his testimony, and now the barrister for the defense is launching a cross-examination on him. The lawyer's goal is to discredit Jack. Jack's job is to stay calm and not have his testimony voided by losing his temper. He wants this terrorist put behind bars for good.

"Tom" has set things up nicely. The conflict is sharply defined. The two characters have opposing goals and the stakes are high. If the barrister, "Red Charlie" Atkinson, succeeds, then his client walks free. If Jack convinces the jury, then the hood goes to jail for life.

We begin with Atkinson addressing Jack in the witness stand:

"Doctor Ryan -- or should I say Sir John?"

Jack waved his hand. "Whatever is convenient to you, sir," he answered indifferently. They had warned him about Atkinson. A very clever bastard, they'd said. Ryan had known quite a few clever bastards in the brokerage business.

Randy sez: Atkinson begins probing Jack by referring to his recent knighthood. The goal here is to make Jack seem snooty to the jury, who are all commoners. Jack counters by making it clear he's not too stuck on himself. Notice that "Tom" is writing here in well-formed MRUs. The comment by Atkinson is objective and external. Jack's response is interspersed with interior monologue, since we are inside his head.

"You were, I believe, a lieutenant in the United States Marine Corps?"

"Yes, sir, that is correct."

Atkinson looked down at his notes, then over at the jury. "Bloodthirsty mob, the U.S. Marines," he muttered.

"Excuse me, sir? Bloodthirsty?" Ryan asked. "No, sir. Most of the Marines I know are beer drinkers."

Randy sez: Atkinson now goes for the throat. His goal is to persuade the jury that Jack is a violent man (he shot two terrorists, after all) and therefore not to be trusted. Jack parries this with politeness and humor, making Atkinson look silly. Jack has scored a point with the jury here, as we see next.

Atkinson spun back at Ryan as a ripple of laughter came down from the gallery. He gave Jack a thin, dangerous smile. They'd warned Jack most of all to beware his word games and tactical skill in the courtroom. To hell with it, Ryan told himself. He smiled back at the barrister. Go for it, asshole . . .

Randy sez: Oops, a couple of boo-boos here, "Tom."

First, you're showing the cause AFTER the effect in the first sentence. The cause is the laughter from the gallery. The effect is Atkinson spinning back toward Ryan. This is a minor glitch which takes your reader ever so slightly out of the present, since the flow of time is temporarily reversed.

The second problem is that you need a paragraph break after Atkinson's action (in which he gives Jack a thin dangerous smile) and Jack's reaction (his interior monologue). A break would cue the reader to switch from the objective to the subjective. Again, it's a minor glitch. A visual cue for the reader is nice but not essential.

We pick up with Atkinson pressing his attack.

"Forgive me, Sir John. A figure of speech. I meant to say that the U.S. Marines have a reputation for aggressiveness. Surely this is true?"

Randy sez: Another attempt by Atkinson to make Jack look bad. There follows some more back-and-forth in which Jack explains what a bunch of good guys Marines are and Atkinson expresses skepticism. We'll pick up a few pages further on, when Atkinson tries to make Jack the aggressor against an innocent Irishman bystander who might very well have been coming to the rescue of the royal family.

"I don't suppose you've been told that my client has never been arrested, or accused of any crime?"

"I guess that makes him a first offender."

"It's for the jury to decide that," the lawyer snapped back. "You did not see him fire a single shot, did you?"

"No, sir, but his automatic had an eight-shot clip, and there were only three rounds in it. When I fired my third shot, it was empty."

Randy sez: Atkinson is working Jack hard, playing off the fact that Jack didn't actually see the terrorist firing the gun. Jack is responding with both humor and logic. He's doing a fine job and the lawyer is getting angry with him.

There aren't many wasted words in this dialogue. No small talk. No convenient exchanges of information. Just war, straight and simple. That's good dialogue. Nice job, "Tom."

Dialogue & The Art Of War – Part 3

In the last two issues, I talked about why dialogue is not like "real conversation" and about what makes good dialogue. In both cases, it boils down to conflict. "Real conversation" either lacks conflict or it lacks the right kind of conflict. Good dialogue has conflict -- lots of it -- and the right kind.

Let's switch gears this month and talk about dialogue tags. The trend for a good number of years now has been to eliminate them, trim them, or change them to action tags. Anything to get rid of that boring "Sally said" at the end of a line.

Remember that you could do a whole lot worse than "Sally said." If you ever read those corny Arrow Joke Books when you were a kid, you'll remember Tom Swifties. If you never heard of a Tom Swifty, let me introduce you now, you poor naive thing, you. There are two kinds, the strong kind and the weak kind.

Some examples of strong Tom Swifties:

"I'm a plumber!" he piped.

"I killed the rooster!" she crowed.

"More air on the fire!" he bellowed.

You get the idea. The dialogue tag is a verb other than "said" which somehow fits the thing being said.

Weak Tom Swifties are easier because they replace the verb with an adverb. Some examples:

"I'm a stonemason," he said archly.

"Your son has the measles," she said feverishly.

"These fries are just right," he said crisply.

The possibilities for wretched dialogue are limitless. So many adverbs, so little time!

In modern fiction, it's considered bad form to use adverbs in your dialogue tags.

Why are adverbs considered a no-no? (Randy asked negatively.)

Simple. Adverbs are telling. Good fiction is showing. I'll pick on Tom Clancy just once more this month and then give the poor guy a break so his sales recover. Tom is famous for lines like this one:

"That dirty, filthy, rotten son of a b****," Jack said furiously.

Well, duh. Yes, Jack is furious here. The dialogue shows it, so why insult the reader's feeble little intellect by telling it?

I suppose a worse crime would be this (which I have never seen in a Clancy novel):

"That showed poor manners," Jack said furiously.

Now we've got the dialogue showing Jack's restraint and then the adverb telling us that he's furious -- entirely at odds with what we just saw. The reader will generally believe what she saw and will ignore the adverb, or worse, will disrespect the writer's competence.

In any event, the important thing to remember is that adverbs need to be tossed in the toilet. (Mildred said, flushing at the impropriety of it all.)

But adverbs aren't the only crime against humanity. It's also considered bad practice to use any verb other than "said" or "asked" in a dialogue tag. You've probably read books where the author was scared to death to use

"said" or any of its synonyms more than once per page. So you get dialogues that look like this little abomination:

"Why are you late again?" Bossbert asked.

"What makes you think I'm late?" Dilbert queried. "By Hawaii time, I'm early."

"Go help Wally," Bossbert snarled. "He's behind again."

"Where is he?" Dilbert questioned.

"How should I know?" Bossbert interrogated. "Just find him!"

"OK, OK, no need to get huffy," Dilbert stated.

"Alice has the design documents," Bossbert informed.

"Dilbert, help us get Wally out of the trash compactor!" Asok requested.

"This place is a zoo," Bossbert spluttered.

The longer this kind of thing goes on, the more the reader gets distracted by the increasingly imaginative synonyms for "said" and "asked." And you don't want to distract your reader from the conflict of the story.

Novice writers always object at this point that it's boring to keep using "said" all the way down the page.

Yes, it's boring. You have two alternatives. First, you can get rid of the tag altogether. If you read John Grisham much, you'll have noticed that in one-on-one dialogues, he rarely uses "said" or any of its synonyms at all. He lets the character's voices tell us who's talking.

When you've got three or more characters in a dialogue, that's harder to do (but still possible if they have distinctive voices). However, you can always use action tags. An action tag eliminates the "Sally said" and adds a new

sentence with Sally DOING something. This breaks up the dialogue and gives the reader something to look at -- always important to the video generation.

Let's look at Dilbert and Bossbert again, this time with action tags. It's still a dumb dialogue, but it's a bit more interesting:

"Why are you late again?" Bossbert leaned back in his chair and twirled his pointy hair with his pudgy fingers.

Dilbert tried again to make his tie lie flat against his shirt. "What makes you think I'm late? By Hawaii time, I'm early."

"Go help Wally." Bossbert bit into a donut. Jelly ran down his fingers onto the carpet. "He's behind again."

"Where is he?"

Bossbert shrugged. "How should I know? Just find him!"

"OK, OK, no need to get huffy." Dilbert tossed his briefcase into his cubicle, grabbed his coffee cup, and scurried down the hall.

"Alice has the design documents." Bossbert padded along behind him.

Asok the intern raced out of the coffee room. "Dilbert, help us get Wally out of the trash compactor!"

Bossbert whacked his hand against his pointy hair. "This place is a zoo."

We draw this bizarre scene to a merciful close. By getting rid of all the "said" words, we've put the scene in motion.

But that's not enough. There's still something missing to turn this into real dialogue. We'll look at that next month.

Dialogue & The Art Of War – Part 4

In the last three issues, I talked about why dialogue is not like "real conversation", about what makes good dialogue, and about the importance of using dialogue tags. In all three cases, it comes down to showing conflict, not telling it. Dialogue is war and you need to show the battle in all its gory glory.

This month, I want to add another dimension to this discussion. The key point is that every war has a "good side" and a "bad side." (That's the theory, anyway. In practice, it ain't necessarily so.)

The "good side" is Us. The "bad side" is Them. War is all about Us against Them. And so is dialogue.

More precisely, dialogue is about Me against Them.

And that brings us to the topic of Point of View (POV). Those of you who've ever heard me speak or have worked through my Fiction 101 series know that there is only one goal for the novelist: You must give your reader a Powerful Emotional Experience. Period.

There is no substitute for this. Everything you do as a novelist should be directed to creating that Powerful Emotional Experience.

Remember that emotion is centered in a character, the POV character. In any given scene, there will be ONE POV character. Your goal as a novelist is therefore extremely simple: Put your reader inside the skin of that POV character and give your reader the same Powerful Emotional Experience that the character is having.

Do that and you are a novelist. Fail to do that and you are forever a wannabe, because even your mother will yawn through your writing.

I'm being dogmatic here because I'm right and every published novelist in the world knows it.

How does this relate to dialogue? Simple. In your dialogue, there are two sides: Me and Them. "Me" refers to your POV character. "Them" refers to everyone else.

You MUST show your dialogue through the lens of your POV character. You must.

Remember the wretched dialogue we looked at last month? (If you've forgotten, you can look it up in the archives on my web site:)

<http://www.advancedfictionwriting.com/ezine/index.php>

Last month, we buffed up that wretched dialogue by adding in action tags. This month, we'll make it better by choosing a POV character and showing the entire dialogue from within the skin of that POV character. In fact, we'll do it twice, from two different POV characters. (Warning: it'll still be wretched dialogue, because you just can't rescue this abomination, even with proper technique.)

Dialogue #1, from Dilbert's POV:

"Why are you late again?" Bossbert leaned back in his chair and twirled his pointy hair with his pudgy fingers.

Dilbert smoothed his tie again. The thing still wouldn't lie flat. This had to be that laundry woman's fault. She hated him -- that was it. "What makes you think I'm late? By Hawaii time, I'm early."

"Go help Wally." Bossbert bit into a donut. Jelly ran down his fingers onto the carpet. "He's behind again."

Dilbert was sick to death of helping Wally, but he was even more sick to death of arguing with Bossbert. "Where is he?"

Bossbert shrugged. "How should I know? Just find him!"

"OK, OK, no need to get huffy." Dilbert tossed his briefcase into his cubicle, grabbed his coffee cup, and scurried down the hall. At least he was rid of the pointy-haired demon from --

"Alice has the design documents." Bossbert padded along behind him.

Dilbert wondered if life could possibly get any better than this.

Asok the intern raced out of the coffee room. "Dilbert, help us get Wally out of the trash compactor!"

Dilbert's heart began racing, but he was pretty sure Asok's news was too good to be true.

Bossbert whacked his hand against his pointy hair. "This place is a zoo."

Dilbert stared at him. Could you die of irony?

* * *

Dialogue #2, from Bossbert's POV:

"Why are you late again?" Bossbert leaned back in his chair and twirled his hair with his fingers, wondering what kind of sad excuse Dilbert was going to make this time.

Dilbert smoothed at his tie like he did every day. It sprang back up again like it did every day. "What makes you think I'm late? By Hawaii time, I'm early."

And how was a boss going to get anything done with an employee like that? Maybe the only hope for Dilbert was osmosis off the star employee in the group. "Go help Wally." Bossbert bit into a donut. Jelly ran down his fingers

onto the carpet. Alice had probably sabotaged the donuts again. "He's behind again." And no wonder, when all Wally's teammates were such screwoffs.

Dilbert got that helpless look on his face that could drive you nuts if you let it. "Where is he?"

Bossbert shrugged. He was not going to let Dilbert get to him. He was NOT. "How should I know? Just find him!"

"OK, OK, no need to get huffy." Dilbert tossed his briefcase into his cubicle, grabbed his coffee cup, and scurried down the hall.

That kind of evasion was just typical of the little worm. Bossbert wasn't going to let him off the hook. He hurried after Dilbert. "Alice has the design documents." You had to spell things out for a guy like Dilbert.

Asok the intern raced out of the coffee room. "Dilbert, help us get Wally out of the trash compactor!"

Bossbert whacked his hand against his head. Thirteen months and fifteen days till retirement. IF these monkeys didn't give him a stroke first. "This place is a zoo."

* * *

Like I said, there's not a lot you can do with a scene this horrible, but we did our best here. In Dialogue #1, we showed the war from Dilbert's side, and Bossbert was the bad guy. Everything Dilbert does has a reason. Everything Bossbert does is inane.

In Dialogue #2, it's the reverse. Now Bossbert is the smart guy, and Dilbert is the dork.

We achieved these effects with a little interior monologue woven into the dialogue. Interior monologue is the train of thoughts inside the POV

character's head. A little interior monologue goes a long way toward getting your reader inside the skin of your POV character.

Of course, you need more than that to write great dialogue. You need stakes. And in the Dilbert/Bossbert scenes above, there really aren't any stakes. Next month, we'll look at some examples of scenes with stakes that are a bit higher.

Dialogue & The Art Of War – Part 5

In the last four issues of this e-zine, I talked about why dialogue is not like "real conversation", about what makes good dialogue, about the importance of using dialogue tags, and about why Point of View is essential to great dialogue. I made the point repeatedly that dialogue is war.

Let's remember that there are hot wars and there are cold wars. You don't need bombs and bazookas to have a war. Sometimes war is a subtle thing, with spies and tea-time diplomacy and softly muted threats on the Red Line to Moscow.

In this issue, I'd like to talk about the use of subtlety in dialogue. In a word, I'd like to talk about subtexting.

The message received is not always identical to the message sent. For two reasons: People don't always say what they mean. People don't always hear what they're saying.

Let's look at an example of this in the work of a master of subtexting -- Jane Austen.

We'll take a passage from PRIDE AND PREJUDICE. To summarize the story, our heroine Lizzy Bennett meets an eligible but extremely arrogant and wealthy young man, Mr. Darcy. They clash immediately, and Lizzy is sure he's the last man on earth she'd ever want to be involved with. She treats him with such a bold impertinence that he is gradually attracted to her. When he finally asks her to marry him, she rejects him flat out, causing a crisis in his life which teaches him to learn to control his pride. Meantime, Lizzy is learning from Darcy's friends that he is quite a bit warmer on the inside than he is on the outside. When Lizzy learns that Darcy has paid a large amount of money to quell a scandal in her

family, she realizes that she has seriously misjudged him. But neither he nor she seems able to break the interpersonal logjam between them. Until . . .

Darcy's wealthy aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, hears rumors that Darcy wants to marry Lizzy. Lady Catherine is shocked and outraged, since she intends that her own daughter should marry Darcy. She assumes that these rumors were begun by Lizzie, based on her belief that Lizzie is like herself -- willing to do anything in order to get what she wants. Lady C. immediately travels to Lizzie's home in the country to confront her.

Lady Catherine completely lacks any tact or civility, and in the scene that follows, she says exactly what she thinks, never hearing her own message that Lizzie is no more than a worm to be squashed. Lizzie defends herself with calm politeness. The subtext of her message is that Lady Catherine is a complete idiot -- which is true enough.

It's a battle of wits between two strong personalities. Lizzie's words are all politeness, but make no mistake -- she returns every insult of Lady C.'s with compound interest. My commentary on the subtext will be shown in square brackets.

To the text, then, with Lady Catherine launching the first volley:

"You can be at no loss, Miss Bennett, to understand the reason of my journey hither. Your own heart, your own conscience, must tell you why I come."

Elizabeth looked with unaffected astonishment.

"Indeed, you are mistaken, Madam. I have not been at all able to account for the honour of seeing you here."

[Randy sez: Lizzie is perfectly polite here, but she feels no honor in seeing Lady C. here. The irony goes right over the Lady's head, however.]

"Miss Bennett," replied her ladyship, in an angry tone, "you ought to know, that I am not to be trifled with. But however insincere you may choose to be, you shall not find me so. My character has ever been celebrated for its sincerity and frankness, and in a cause of such moment as this, I shall certainly not depart from it...."

[Randy sez: It's typical of Lady C. that she characterizes her own amazing rudeness as "sincerity and frankness". As we noted last month, everybody thinks they're the good guy. Lady C. interprets Lizzie's ignorance of the rumor as "insincerity" because she assumes Lizzie knows as much as she does.]

"... A report of a most alarming nature, reached me two days ago. I was told, that not only your sister was on the point of being most advantageously married, but that you, that Miss Elizabeth Bennet, would, in all likelihood, be soon afterwards united to my nephew, my own nephew, Mr. Darcy. Though I know it must be a scandalous falsehood; though I would not injure him so much as to suppose the truth of it possible, I instantly resolved on setting off for this place, that I might make my sentiments known to you."

"If you believed it impossible to be true," said Elizabeth, colouring with astonishment and disdain, "I wonder you took the trouble of coming so far. What could your ladyship propose by it?"

[Randy sez: Touche, Lizzie! You've called her an idiot while affecting to be concerned for the trouble the lady has gone to.]

"At once to insist upon having such a report universally contradicted."

"Your coming to Longbourn, to see me and my family," said Elizabeth coolly, "will be rather a confirmation of it; if, indeed, such a report is in existence."

"If! do you then pretend to be ignorant of it? Has it not been industriously circulated by yourselves? Do you not know that such a report is spread abroad?"

"I never heard that it was."

[Randy sez: Lizzie has scored another point by noting the obvious fact that Lady C.'s visit will only fan the flames of this rumor. Again, her subtext is that Lady Catherine is a fool. Here, it feels like the two are reading from different scripts. Lady Catherine assumes Lizzie is behind the rumor. But Lizzie really has never heard of the rumor -- though she welcomes it.]

"And can you likewise declare, that there is no foundation for it?"

"I do not pretend to possess equal frankness with your ladyship. You may ask questions, which I shall choose not to answer."

[Randy sez: The subtext of Lady C. is that Lizzie is so low-born that such a marriage is not even possible. This is an insult and is not true. Lizzie is the daughter of a gentleman and has the same social standing as Darcy, only less wealthy. Lizzie picks up the word "frankness" from Lady C. and with heavy irony uses it as a replacement for "rudeness".]

"This is not to be borne. Miss Bennett, I insist on being satisfied. Has he, has my nephew, made you an offer of marriage?"

"Your ladyship has declared it to be impossible."

[Randy sez: Lizzie scores a direct hit. Only an idiot would ask if an impossible thing has occurred. But again, it's subtext. Lizzie politely reminds Lady Catherine of what she said earlier.]

"It ought to be so; it must be so, while he retains the use of his reason. But your arts and allurements may, in a moment of infatuation, have

made him forget what he owes to himself and to all his family. You may have drawn him in."

"If I have, I shall be the last person to confess it."

[Randy sez: Lady C.'s subtext is, "Lizzie, you're just a slut who lured my poor nephew in." Lizzie's subtext is, "You're an idiot to think a slut would admit to such a thing." The ground is bloody here with subtended insults. We skip the next couple of paragraphs to get to more subtext.]

"Let me be rightly understood. This match, to which you have the presumption to aspire, can never take place. No, never. Mr. Darcy is engaged to my daughter. Now what have you to say?"

"Only this; that if he is so, you can have no reason to suppose he will make an offer to me."

[Randy sez: Again, Lady C.'s subtext is that Lizzie is a conniving little home-breaker. Lizzie's subtext is that Lady Catherine is irrational, since Darcy is an honorable man who would never make an offer to one woman while engaged to another. But Lizzie holds a high card here that she hasn't shown Lady Catherine. Darcy has already proposed to Lizzie some months earlier, and she rejected him then. So Lizzie knows that Darcy's "engagement" to Lady Catherine's daughter is no engagement at all.]

The scene goes on for a few more pages, but we'll let it rest here. Lizzie has won this battle -- decisively. Note how restrained her words have been. Lizzie does not need the F-word, the B-word, the A-word, or the S-word. She uses her wits and a forceful subtext to deflect the full frontal assault of Lady Catherine's wrath.

The scene is all the more powerful for it.

Did you like that?

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