

Feedback Loops

Terry Caesar

TOXIC FEEDBACK: HELPING WRITERS SURVIVE AND THRIVE

Joni Cole

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If you're a writer, it's easy to feel that writing manuals stand in the same relation to writing as sex manuals stand in relation to sex: you don't need one in order to accomplish the other. But what if you merely aspire to be a writer? What if you lack confidence or inspiration? In *Toxic Feedback*, Joni Cole faces such questions relentlessly, directly, and honestly. Over and over again, in a variety of ways, she proposes a disarmingly simple solution to every problem: acknowledge the need for feedback in the writing process even as you try to rid it of toxicity.

Immediately, we have a fine theoretical question: how can feedback be purged of the toxic potential implicit in any response to a piece of writing? That is, how can we tell beforehand if somebody's response to our work is going to be "toxic" or not—so critical that we can't continue, rather than so reassuring that we must continue? No more than any other author of a writing guide, Cole can't ultimately answer this question. What she can do better than anybody I've ever read is instead effectively blunt it with an array of anecdotes, personal examples, practical advice, and sheer good humor.

"I would define feedback as *any response*," Cole begins, "to the writer or his work that helps him write more and write better." A generous definition. Indeed, so generous as to be contradicted in subsequent pages. Samina Ali, for example, tells a story about a "top agent" who was nothing if not enthusiastic about her manuscript, including proposing to change not only her genre (memoirs now being hotter than novels) but her own name! Talk about feedback! Ali shudders to remember how she almost lost her soul to it.

Another chapter follows in the book. Most are charmingly punchy and short. More examples accumulate. Some continue to be at variance to Cole's opening definition of feedback. (Including one from Ernest Hebert, who once had a "feedback provider" no less than John Gardner put his manuscript down with the declaration, "No real writer would write a sentence like that." Talk about toxic! Yet to Hebert it was as if he had been "born again.") Not to worry. The life of *Toxic Feedback* is in the plenitude, vivacity, and incisiveness of its examples.

Rather quickly, an authentic, messy picture of the writing life emerges, in which finally nothing necessarily makes sense, or at least the sense Cole strives to make it mean in terms of her title's thematic. Are some "feedback providers" better than others? Sure. But sometimes somebody—especially if you lack a "feedback hotline" person—is better than nobody. Except of course for the times when it isn't, and a writer is better off suffering the rigors of the next sentence alone.

Toxic Feedback is divided into four sections: "Rethinking Feedback," "Getting Feedback," "Receiving Feedback," and "In the Company of Writers," which is about writing workshops and publishing. The format of the book is most attractive, including

boxed insert tips as well as end-of-chapter profiles of published writers and question-and-answer pages from both Cole herself and her interviews of other writers (Grace Paley and Ted Kooser probably the most well-known). Always, Cole appears to be the sort of writer, excuse me, feedback provider, another writer would like to have—snappy, loaded with experience, ready with personal nuance for even the hoariest advice, off the cuff, and other good things. In a distinct sense, the writing experience of this guidebook authorizes itself in the best possible way: through the personality of its guide. Cole has been there. She doesn't see everything. Who can? But she sees more than most and has faced all mysteries of the page head-on.

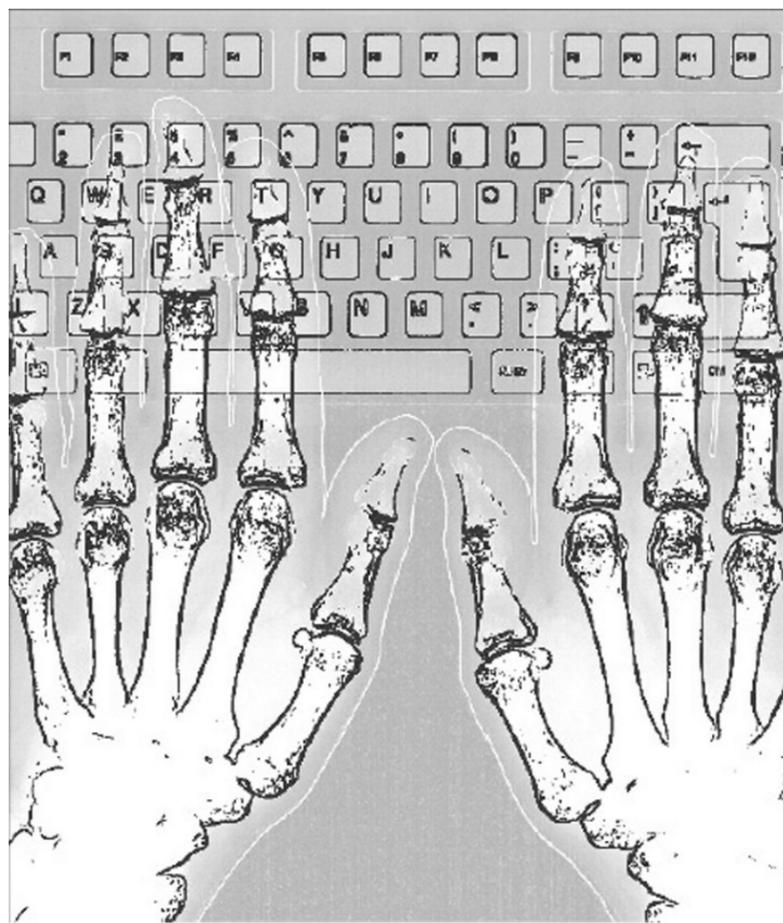
What can we conclude about them? Take the question of individual "providers" versus writing workshop. Which is the better choice? Wisely, Cole never discusses the question directly, and not only because for many people no such choice really exists. What she does do is give some of the best pages of instruction about writing workshops I've ever read. Authority in them? She is blunt: "Every writing group, without exception, needs someone to be in charge." Some rules? Cole provides ten, including no whining about in-class exercises and avoid comparisons. A cast of characters? We are given eleven, among them the grammarian and the outpatient. Cole's four pages of characterization should be required reading by all.

Another question: does the moment of publication introduce an entirely different dynamic into the writing process? Indeed, is it part of the writing process at all? Once again, Cole's strategy (except the word seems too grand) is not to pose the matter in such a way, preferring instead to empty cold water on it, thus: "My advice on how to get published? Get a New York City phone book; get a copy of *Writer's Market*; and prepare to feel like Joan Crawford's adopted daughter in *Mommie Dearest* every time you check the mailbox—'No more wire hangers! No more wire hangers!'"

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Ultimately, *Toxic Feedback* is not so much a book for a writer who wants to get published as for a writer who first wants to get what he or she is trying to communicate down on paper. Is this latter person the same as the one who strives for publication, much less the one who succeeds? Another thing not to bother about. Cole has a chapter entitled "The Club." The Club consists of Real Writers. Her advice to her readers, students, and providees: don't worry if you are worthy of membership. "Because the truth is, if you are writing, you already meet the criteria of a Real Writer. You already belong to The Club."

What to reply? That to Cole's intended audience such advice will, most importantly, keep you



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writing? Undoubtedly it will. Believing you belong is certainly better advice than fretting about the criteria, at least for the novice writer. And yet, like toxicity itself, the question of one's worth, or even worthiness, as a writer won't be banished so easily. Believing you already belong will keep you on the page. But it might not take you to the end, it won't get the page published, and it might even prevent your words from being meaningful to somebody else if you get too heedless or careless.

Alas, there are more strenuous, solitary imperatives for the writer. After mentioning that she indeed has a couple of providers, Grace Paley continues: "But I do the revising on my own. You have to learn how to do it on your own because the point of revision is to get closer to what you want to say. You look at it and say, *It's nice, but that's not what I want to say*. You bring it closer and closer to your truth. So in the end, there is no help with that from anyone in the whole world." So much for feedback. The whole business of writing is not wholly explicable as a social one.

Finally, it seems, a writer—I suppress the urge to write "real"—has to go it alone. There is a time in the creative process when everything else falls away, including the need for feedback. It is a measure of Cole's own tolerance and intelligence about writing that she knows this. Everything she advises is designed to bring the writer to the point where feedback is no longer necessary. Until the point where each writer's own individual truth can become fully available, though, feedback remains an inescapable part of the whole writing process. I can't imagine a better guide to its rewards and perils than this fine book.

Terry Caesar's last book is *Traveling through the Boondocks* (2000). He writes a monthly column for the online journal *Inside Higher Education*.

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