

FEHLER

The Art of Mistakes: Writing Wrongs

by Bilal Qureshi

Bilal Qureshi: My name is Bilal Qureshi. I'm a radio journalist and culture writer. Welcome to this chapter in the series FEHLER (Mistakes). I'd like to begin with a personal confession. For years, I've been working on a book. It's not finished. Not even close. An unfinished draft from years ago is sitting at my desk. It's filled with marks, some pages that worked but most that definitely did not. It feels like a monument to my mistake, a colossal waste of time – or is it? A few weeks after the lockdown began earlier this year, I had to reduce my intake of the news – endless breaking news about a breaking world. And to shelter from that storm, I returned to novels and to creative writing for the first time in years. As any fiction reader knows, great writing has the power to entertain, to illuminate, but also to console and to make you feel less alone. As I've found myself admiring the finished books in my own library with a renewed admiration this year, I've been wondering how artists transform daily language into artful writing – expressive books, evocative screenplays, unforgettable characters. And how do they navigate the pitfalls of constant mistakes? So I spoke with four professional writers – and four friends – about their own writing process and about the role of mistakes in their writing lives. The drafts that they've finished and the drafts they have not.

Beena Kamlani: My name is Beena Kamlani and I'm an editor and I'm a writer of fiction.

Cord Jefferson: My name is Cord Jefferson and I'm a television writer and producer.

Hani Yousuf: I'm Hani Yousuf. I used to be a journalist but I switched to writing fiction a few years ago.

Amirah Tajdin: I'm Amirah Tajdin, filmmaker and screenwriter.

Bilal Qureshi: Let's begin with the popular image of the 'Writer,' a lonely figure sitting on a chaotic desk, head lowered into one's hands... crumpling papers into the dustbin of failures.

Beena Kamlani: I myself throw away a lot. Sometimes I go digging in that bin to find that piece of paper 'cause I think no...the way I said it there was far better.

Bilal Qureshi: Or to modernize the image: the cold glow of a blank screen in Microsoft Word.

Hani Yousuf: Often my husband will come into my office, be like are you okay, are you, you're just sitting there alone, and he's learned over time my most productive time as a writer is doing nothing and staring into space.

Cord Jefferson: For me that has always been the creative process – is just hemming and hawing and being terrified and thinking this is stupid and being unwilling to show anybody the work that you're doing because you're so embarrassed about it.

Amirah Tajdin: With math or science, there's formulas so you that don't make mistakes and you follow those formulas and you won't make a mistake...but with art, there's no formula – there's no formula to feelings. So mistakes are necessary.

Beena Kamlani: You know what it is really, Bilal – it is falling. You have to fall. Perhaps for some people there is a route that's straight and clear, but for no one I know has it been ever been straight and clear – no one I respect and no one I truly hold up as an example of the best of the writerly craft.

Bilal Qureshi: I met my friend Hani Yousuf years ago in Berlin. She and I are both alumni of the same journalism school – and like me, Hani began her career as a journalist. She now writes fiction full-time from her home office in Karachi. While she worked as a reporter, she says what she really longed for were the messy, grand novels that she read and loved as a young woman – the lives and tribulations created on the page through the piercing language of a novelist – not the factual and practical language of a journalist.

Hani Yousuf: I grew up in Karachi, as you know, in the 80s, there wasn't much by way of entertainment. My greatest access was to works of fiction in English and it didn't matter if it was a man in Michigan in the 1940s or a woman in late 20th century Russia, what united us all was the tragic flaw in all our lives, the mistakes that we make, the repentance, the mistakes that we can't undo and the mistakes that we can undo.

Bilal Qureshi: But in the creation of that kind of writing Hani is talking about, there are roadblocks aplenty – and many invisible mistakes. Beena Kamlani has worked in New York publishing for three decades. She's edited books, novels, memoirs, and non-fiction. I asked Beena to tell me exactly what are the writer's biggest mistakes?

Beena Kamlani: It's the obvious ones: the wrong agent, the wrong editor, the wrong publisher, to the less overt ones, the misguided themes and the characters that took so much energy and blood...the exaltation of subjects that then become meaningless as the world changes around you. And then there are other mistakes: sending it out too quickly, which is so understandable because for years you've been sitting, closeted, chained to your desk, writing this thing, and you're dying to send it out there and get some feedback...but it could be premature, it could be too early. Books take a very long time to write. If it's fiction, four years is not uncommon, longer is probably more the rule.

Cord Jefferson: We started writing *Watchmen* in 2017 – you know, two years before it aired.

Bilal Qureshi: Cord Jefferson is now one of the most acclaimed writers in the current golden age of American television. He's written for shows including *Master of None*, *The Good Place*, *Succession* – and his writing for the series novel *Watchmen* has earned him his industry's

highest accolade – an Emmy nomination. But Cord says before there can any episodes ready to stream, there are mistakes.

Cord Jefferson: You'll work on a script that probably goes through four or five rewrites even before you send it to the network for instance, and then the network might see it and send you back their notes, and then you'll go away and rewrite based on their notes. And then you'll have a table read, then you'll go back and rewrite that and then sometimes you're sitting on set with the actors and the director and you're saying...this isn't working and we need to rewrite this on the fly on the set sitting there in the chair. It is just constant revision over and over and over again.

Bilal Qureshi: Revision after revision can easily sow self-doubt and the editor Beena Kamlani says that remains one of the great vulnerability of any writer's life.

Beena Kamlani: In a sense this is about the toxic nature of prolonged self-doubt, which you always have as an artist: is the work good enough to be put out there, should it go out at all, who am I writing about these 'big' things – should I be writing about it, will anyone listen to me? Why should they? So there are all these questions. We are programmed for self-doubt and self-destruction.

Bilal Qureshi: But to the point Beena Kamlani just raised, why are writers programmed for that kind of self-doubt and self-destruction? It's not just the mistakes one makes on the page or in the craft of writing. The answer to that question lies in the unpaved, unclear road maps of this mysterious career.

Beena Kamlani: You know I did want to share this one thing with you. There's this absolutely fabulous book called *Lost Illusions* by Balzac. It's part of his *La Comédie humaine* series. It's about Paris, it's about publishing and what that involves and he says this: "...one can only become great at a price. The works of genius are watered with tears. Talent is a mortal creature that has like all other living beings a childhood subject to maladies. Society discourages imperfect talents just as nature eliminates feeble or misshapen creatures. Whoever wishes to rise above the common run of men, must be prepared to fight a battle and not retreat at the first difficulty. A great writer is nothing less than a martyr who refuses to die."

Bilal Qureshi: Beena says whether it was Paris in the 19th century or the writing rooms of Los Angeles in the television age, writers have to remain resilient in a world that often doesn't understand them. Writing is a 'career' that doesn't always make sense to the outside world – professionally, financially, and culturally. Let's take Cord Jefferson's trajectory from being an essayist to becoming one of the most acclaimed television writers working today. Cord and I first met in DC ten years ago when he was working as a political journalist covering the intersection of race and the Obama presidency. The articles were paying the bills but the endless cycle of racism and backlash was wearing him down. Five years ago, Cord decided to leave journalism for good. He wrote a farewell essay about why he no longer wanted to report on Black pain as a Black writer.

Cord Jefferson: I started to ask myself is this really what I want to do with my life, is this really what I want to do be doing with my time, day in and day out...and I realized that at a certain point, I just couldn't keep doing it or my own sanity.

Bilal Qureshi: Was there ever a time Cord when you were leaving journalism and you wrote that essay and you were moving to Los Angeles without knowing what exactly

would come of that transition – did you ever worry that you were going to make a mistake?

Cord Jefferson: Yeah I was terrified of making a mistake. I was confident that I had made a huge mistake. For a while, the time between my first TV show and second TV show job was seven and eight months. For about seven to eight months I languished in unemployment and I just felt like I had made a tremendous mistake and I had now set my journalism career back by eight months. I was very, very, very close to giving up though. I was literally two months away from quitting. But I will say that has been the biggest cause for my success in my whole life – is being willing to embrace potential failure.

Bilal Qureshi: Do you feel like you're forgiving of yourself when you make a mistake and when you feel you've made a creative or professional mistake related to your writing?

Cord Jefferson: Absolutely not [*laughs*] I am the harshest critic in the world on myself and I think that that comes from...Damon Lindelof, the show runner of *Watchmen*, I remember a funny day in the writers room, he asked everybody in the writers room...he said raise your hand if your father was always slightly disapproving of what you were doing [*laughs*] and I think like 80 or 90 percent of the room raised our hands – and he said, yes exactly...his point was that disapproving fathers or disapproving parental figures were incredibly helpful in making people ambitious and making people driven toward a singular goal.

Bilal Qureshi: Hani Yousuf tells me that her early love of novels – her early inclination she wanted to be a writer – was immediately met with parental and cultural disapproval.

Hani Yousuf: To say I want to be a writer just seemed too whimsical. It was, but what are you going to do for a living. How are you going to make money? And soon after, my parents told me it was a big mistake.

Beena Kamlani: Just as Edwidge Danticat says, who do we think we are, you know. There is that reckoning with yourself: who do you think you are? You're not a writer, you're not a writer. But there's the writer sensibility manifesting itself every day. Writing on trains, writing on paper napkins, writing on newspapers. Cutting out bits and stuffing them in your bag. There's the writer at work and for how long do you deny that? For how long do you overlook it? You can't. You can't.

Bilal Qureshi: But as Beena Kamlani tells me, impediments and rejections from others are the defining features of a writing career.

Beena Kamlani: I think we make our biggest mistakes when we hand over the right to assess our own abilities – what we're worth – to others. I see that as my biggest mistake. That I gave up too easily. Earlier, not now.

Hani Yousuf: I think the biggest mistake that a writer can make is not to write, which is a mistake many writers make and I think that's the only mistake one really needs to regret.

Bilal Qureshi: Hani Yousuf's point about the writers mistakes brings me back to our deeply ingrained attitudes toward mistakes across cultures. In most careers, mistakes have

consequences. There are rules of conduct when you join a company and any deviation from those rules have real-world repercussions. But is the language of mistakes even the right word to describe what writers face and what they learn to untangle? So I asked Hani Yousuf to help me unpack the very language of mistakes – the word itself.

Bilal Qureshi: This project is about exploring the idea of mistakes, of Fehler in German. I guess in Urdu it would be 'ghaltian,' I suppose, is that the best word for it? I'm just thinking about the words that connote mistake, the word itself – as a writer, you deal with words, so when you hear the word mistake or when I wrote you an email to ask you I wanted to talk to you about mistakes – is it a heavy word or does it feel like a word that doesn't stress you out so much.

Hani Yousuf: It's interesting thing that you pointed out the word for mistakes in three languages that both of us know, in Urdu, German and English. With the word 'ghalati' in Urdu, it's almost like nonchalant.

Bilal Qureshi: Yeah, it's less burdened I think. It's less...there is a kind of lightness to it in a way.

Hani Yousuf: There's a kind of self-forgiveness built into it – because well it's just a 'ghalati,' – I didn't do it knowingly...so there's that in-built notion of I didn't deliberately want to hurt you. It was a ghalati. You know what I mean.

Bilal Qureshi: I know what you mean. And when I think about the term Fehler in German, what I remember from time in Germany is that – “Ich habe einen Fehler gemacht oder somebody has made a mistake,” it's a very, it feels heavy to me as a word.

Hani Yousuf: Did you feel like Fehler feels almost feels like failure? Which is very burdened to me, like it's mistake plus failure.

Bilal Qureshi: No no, it does. And I think once you say failure, I just think system fail. Like, this is game over.

Hani Yousuf: Yeah.

Bilal Qureshi: And mistake as a word in English, it does still feel to me like a word that implies some repentance is required for it or some kind of action is required to repair for it. Like you've made a mistake, now you need to fix it.

Hani Yousuf: And also mistake in my Catholic school upbringing was very heavy. It was written in red felt tip marker on my books and were a declaration of what a failure I am... and I think the sort of process of taking the red felt tip out of the word mistake and morphing it into the lighter, 'ghalati' is kind of also part of the process of the writer, taking that word, taking its history, taking its baggage and making it your own.

Bilal Qureshi: But how do writers ultimately overcome the dark forces of self-sabotage. How do they get over their mistakes?

Amirah Tajdin: I went to art school as well and we were told you have to go through your process. That's okay. It was part of your journey to get there and a mistake will always be part of your journey to get there.

Bilal Qureshi: Amirah Tajdin is a Kenyan-born filmmaker. She's been writing her first screenplay for six years...and most recently, as a fellow of the Sundance Film Institute. She says it's critical to choose the right creative partners and the right early readers – someone who doesn't just point out your mistakes, but helps you see through them.

Amirah Tajdin: How do you make less mistakes as you write more? I think for me mistake is a lack of editing and I think what I've learned is you have to sit with your words and edit.

Bilal Qureshi: Beena Kamlani says that's how she sees her role as an editor of books.

Beena Kamlani: Well the good thing about this is that almost everyone has made the same mistakes. And you know there's comfort in that, that this is not unique to you. It is part of the creative process. It's a part of it. An author I absolutely respected and revered and loved, Saul Bellow, he called it clairvoyance...and it's almost like seeing the pillars of the work and you see your job as making those pillars as strong as they can be to carry the weight of this work.

Bilal Qureshi: Cord Jefferson, who began his career as a solitary essayist, now writes in writing rooms with groups. Cord says in this current ambitious age of television writing, you simply have to abandon your ego and embrace the mysterious power of making mistakes.

Cord Jefferson: If you're punitive and punish yourself or you punish your coworkers for making mistakes or for writing something that isn't working, you are doing a disservice to what you need – because you need openness. You need people willing to try new things, 'cause I think that there's where you'll see sparks of brilliance is when people are willing to try something crazy and off-the-wall, that is a big swing, that might not work but if it does work and if it's executed well, then you look like a genius.

Amirah Tajdin: It's practice. I'm a person who believe truly in practice making things perfect or a version of perfect. And once you practice the language you have with yourself as an artist, I think we all have a language that we speak with ourselves and once you've mastered like hearing yourself, then and only then can you truly go out there and be like, no I won't make a mistake with this one. I've got it.

Bilal Qureshi: Amirah Tajdin says one's carefully chosen and cultivated creative circle and a forgiving approach to making mistakes can help turn mistakes into creative gold. And while we're on the subject of gold, Amirah tells me about one of her own personal philosophies about making mistakes. It comes from a Japanese art form called Kintsugi, which is a reference to a way to repair broken pottery. In Japan, instead of disposing of something cracked or broken or shattered, there's an art form to repairing those objects. Instead of simply gluing something back together in ways that can never recreate the original, the Japanese embrace those shattered surfaces. They glue objects back together and then paint over the repaired cracks with gold paint, turning fractures into scars that are worn proudly and worn beautifully. That is Kintsugi.

Amirah Tajdin: I mean I absolutely love it as a concept and also as an art form. I do honestly believe that sometimes you have to break things apart to put them back together again. But say it's a broken clay vase or something and it breaks and you put it back together with super glue – it's not as kintsugi but you put it back together with gold, then it's kintsugi and that will always make something lovely to look at.

Bilal Qureshi: Beena Kamlani says perfectionism is anathema to the art of writing. The finished page is always achieved through a process.

Beena Kamlani: Resist the temptation to see it as a marvelous thing of beauty just because you've spent all that time on it – but recognize its flaws.

Bilal Qureshi: Every mistake and every triumph sharpens helps clarify one's own personal constitution, one's own creative journey.

Beena Kamlani: You know this is a long, long road. From what we've discussed today, you can see that it's a long, long road. And some of the writers I've followed through their careers will look back and say, I would never have written that book now. This is what's wrong with it. This is what's wrong with it. I would have never written that book that way now. Either not written it at all or not written it that way. And writers will do that because their toughest antenna are for themselves and those antennas are being sharpened daily with the work that you do.

Bilal Qureshi: Hmm. So it's almost living in a constant flow of your mistakes in a way. It's like living in the river of your, learning to row through your misguided and sometimes tumultuous flow of your thoughts.

Beena Kamlani: Exactly. But it's not just mistakes. It's also the glow. It's also the vitality. It's also the radiance. And honestly, that's the rapture. That is where the rapture of it lies, what Virginia Woolf referred to as rapture. She said, "I walk, making up phrases, sit, contriving scenes, am in short in the thick of the greatest rapture known to me." And this is why one does it, you know. In the end that's what it comes down to. The sentences, the images, the discovery of oneself and why you're here and what is this life all about. You know, and in the end that's why you do it.

Bilal Qureshi: Again, Beena Kamlani – editor and novelist. I'd like to thank Beena along with my other guests – Cord Jefferson, Hani Yousuf, and Amirah Tajdin for taking the time and for being open to sharing the stories of their own mistakes. With these conversations illuminating my own path, in recent weeks, I've slowly returned to my own first draft – to the pages of a book I started and then abandoned in a series of red-lined mistakes. Maybe one day, it too, will be a work ready for an audience – its mistakes visible to others in shimmering Kintsugi gold. Here's to embracing the art of mistakes – to absorbing and integrating flaws as fundamental to the creative process – a prerequisite to the pursuit of rapture...and a prerequisite to finding the magic in words. I'm Bilal Qureshi.

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