

A DELETE BUTTON CAN BE A WRITER'S BEST FRIEND

BY DANNY HEITMAN, FORUM EDITOR

When I attended a talk with Jeffrey Marx, I expected to learn a lot about how he crafted *Season of Life*, his celebrated story about a high school football team's life-altering lessons from their inspirational coach.

But Marx, a Pulitzer Prize-winning sports journalist who's authored other acclaimed books, took some time to mention what didn't end up in *Season of Life*. "My best friend is the delete button," Marx told his audience, noting that much of a writer's work involves knowing what to leave out.

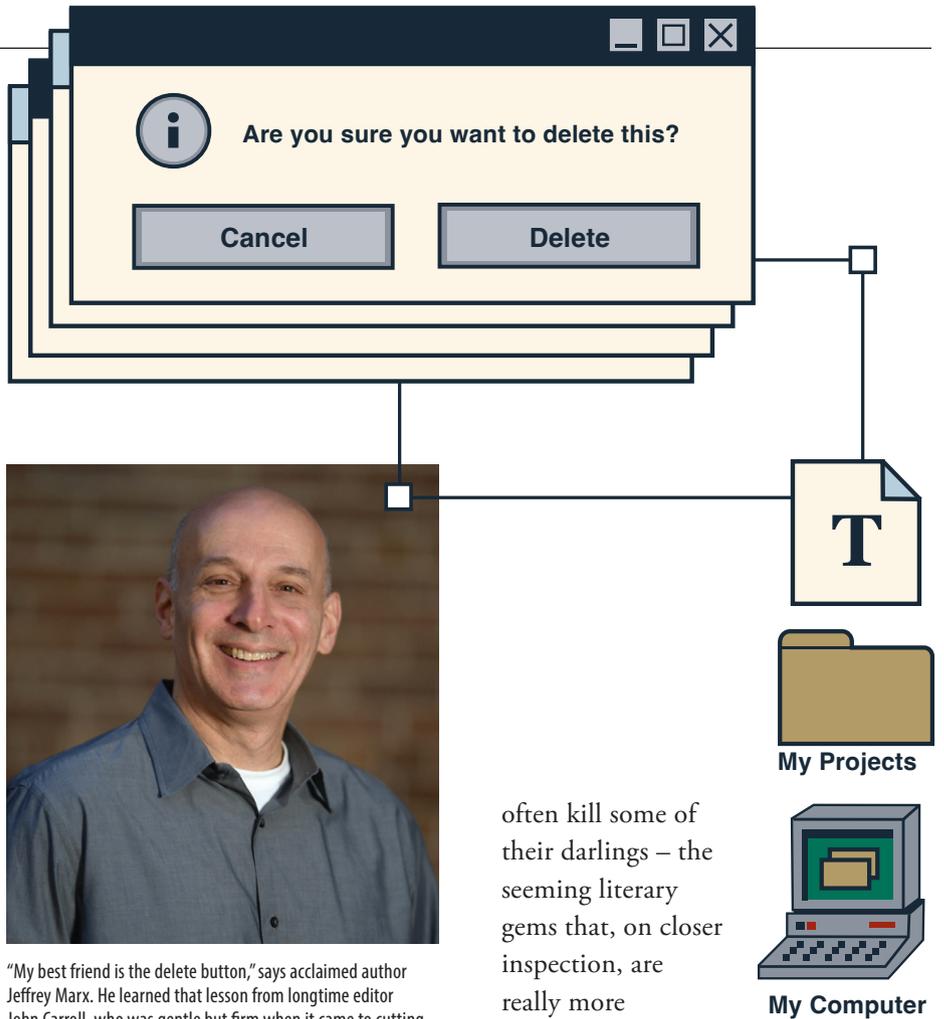
"I try to remind myself all the time: Less is more," Marx later told me. "I'm fortunate that I learned that in journalism school."

Whether one is writing nonfiction or fiction, a play or a poem, the key question remains: Is a passage pushing the work forward or bogging it down? If the material isn't driving a project toward its ultimate goal, it should go. That principle, seemingly so simple, can be hard for a writer to follow. We tend to get attached to words we've worked hard to get on the page, especially when they've grown from lengthy reporting or research.

Many years ago, while I was profiling an elderly hospital volunteer named Farrow Behrens, she told me about her early days in a town so small that cars were rarely needed to get around. Behrens once forgot her car in a local parking lot and didn't miss it for a week, not realizing its absence until her husband pointed it out. I loved the anecdote and struggled to include it in my story about her selfless hours comforting the sick. But regardless of its charm, the tale about the overlooked auto didn't really fit into the narrative of a longtime community volunteer. I ultimately jettisoned that passage, using it later in a commentary I wrote about the possibilities of life without cars.

Deleting material from a project can feel easier if we remember that the stuff we cut might find a purpose later on.

Marx told me he tries to remember some advice on the subject from Stephen King. The horror novelist has argued that for their work to succeed, writers must



"My best friend is the delete button," says acclaimed author Jeffrey Marx. He learned that lesson from longtime editor John Carroll, who was gentle but firm when it came to cutting material that wasn't working. Photo provided by Jeffrey Marx.

often kill some of their darlings – the seeming literary gems that, on closer inspection, are really more of a burden than a blessing.

"I keep a file called 'dead darlings,'" Marx said. Into the file goes material that didn't work for a project, though it might get another life somewhere else.

As he hits the delete button, Marx is honoring the tradition of his later mentor and editor, John Carroll, a hallowed figure in the school of less-is-more. Marx can still remember Carroll's advice when a stretch of prose needed surgery: "Trust me on this. Take it out. No one's going to miss it."



Forum editor **DANNY HEITMAN** has written about the writing craft for numerous publications, including *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, and he's taught writing to university students.