

MW: Yeah, new writers of any kind—they shouldn't agonize over pitch letters. Write the thing itself. Pitch letters, as with proposals, are not really a form. They're just a tool. Sure, they're useful in their way, but if you can write a great piece or a great poem or a great story or a great chapter, then keep doing *that*.

KA: I think new writers do get hung up on those details.

MW: I mean, I'm not saying a good letter isn't useful. I got an email about three years ago from a concert pianist in Belgium named Leona Francombe. She said she had bought a book I published, *The Great War* by the cartoon journalist Joe Sacco, a one-of-a-kind book: a wordless, 20-foot-long drawing of the first day of the Battle of the Somme. So I get this email from her and it said she had bought Sacco's book and loved it and she felt awkward writing, because she spent 30 years essentially playing Schubert for a living but she'd been working for years on this piece of writing about one war seen from an unusual angle, like Joe Sacco's book was, and would I take a look at it?

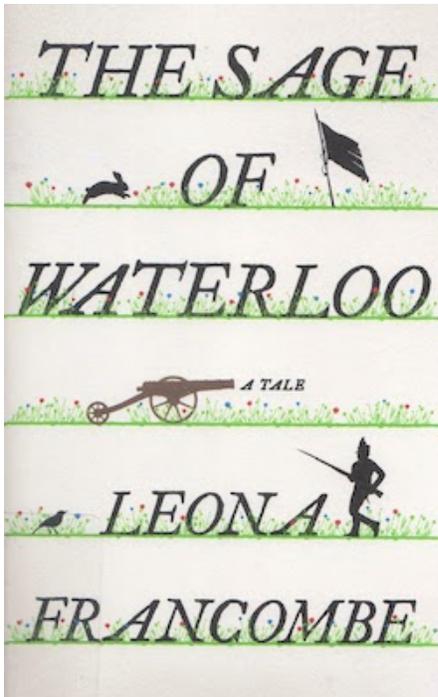
She said it was about the Battle of Waterloo as told by a rabbit. I would never have said I was in the market for sentient rabbit fiction, but—you know, it was just a great email. I also liked that she said, "I'm not sure what this is," which I always think is a great thing to say about a piece of writing. I think often a piece of writing doesn't jibe with our typical divisions of fiction or nonfiction, or fit into any particular genre or whatever. As any editor would, getting an email like that, I was like, Yeah, send it right on! It was called *The Sage of Waterloo*, and I loved it from the first paragraph—I thought it was an exceptionally distinctive and very moving book, one that reminded me of Annie Dillard and Barry Lopez books from a long time ago that were fiction on the edge of nonfiction with a slightly philosophical cast of mind and a real engagement with the natural world. And it was short; I love short books. It was 40,000 words, which I think is a beautiful thing. Anyway, happily my colleagues shared my high feelings for it. Though they spent months hopping past my office door after that. (I'm pretty sure they were making fun of me, and maybe they still are...) But I was very proud of that because she had published nothing yet in magazines.

KA: When was this published?

MW: For the 250th anniversary of Waterloo, of course.

KA: You'll have to remind me when that was.

MW: 2015! And the cover is beautiful. We have a fabulous art department here. This was designed by Charlotte Strick, who is one of the best designers in America.



KA: Let's get down to the nitty gritty on what we were just talking about with your Waterloo rabbit; what are you looking for, or not looking for in a book?

MW: I think I've done my sentient rabbit book for my life.

KA: How do you know what's going to be a book for you, including that book?

MW: I don't know ahead of time but I know almost immediately. I can feel it. I'm sure every editor is this way. There's a feeling—you start trying to turn the pages too quickly, because you get so excited about it. Certainly, it's a sound on the page thing. I think, strangely, it's very hard for writers to sound like themselves on the page. That takes a lot