

Note: This is an actual manuscript review, reproduced with the author's permission. However, character names have been changed and portions of the review have been redacted to protect the author's intellectual property. Ellipses (...) indicate places where material has been redacted. – James Pence

Sample Manuscript Review (Fiction)

General Thoughts

Introduction

Thanks for letting me read and critique ...*Book Title*....

You've come a long way since the last time I saw this book, and you've done a great job of improving it. I went back and re-read the review I did of your first draft. I couldn't give a lot of substantive critique other than to tell you that you had enough material for two novels and needed to do some serious cutting. This time around, I could dig more into the story structure, characters, etc. Hopefully my suggestions will be helpful.

Before we get into specifics, I want to encourage you to keep writing and keep working on this book. It's not ready for prime-time yet, but it's light years beyond where it was last time.

Also, let me assure you that you have a knack for writing fiction. I've seen a lot of fiction by unpublished writers, and your stuff is excellent. You create great characters, write realistic dialog, and have a good feel for storytelling.

If I were to list a primary weakness, it's that for some reason you don't seem to want to bring the bad guys on stage. Your antagonist is almost a ghost figure, as we see him only rarely. Remember that all fiction, no matter the genre, is driven by conflict. Readers want to worry about your protagonist, and without a strong antagonist to oppose him, there's not much reason to worry. That results in a weak story. Strengthen your antagonist and you'll have a powerful novel.

Strengths

Word Count: At just under 83,000 words, your word count is good for a novel.

Dialog: As I mentioned in my review last time, you've got an excellent feel for dialog. This is one of the most difficult aspects of fiction writing, and you handle it like a pro. Your dialog is well-written and to the point. It does a good job of developing character and advancing the story line.

Characterization: Your characters are well-developed and convincing. This is one of the strongest aspects of your writing. You create great characters. They all have distinct personalities, ways of speaking, and character tags. I can see them in my mind, which is exactly what you want.

Theme: Theme can be subjective, and different readers will take away different things. For me, it was self-sacrifice and forgiveness. William repeatedly, particularly in the latter part of the book, sets himself and his own wishes aside in the interest of achieving the greatest good. This even involves forgiveness,

although the word is never used. But for him to defer to John as he does, there has to be forgiveness involved.

Spiritual Element: I think you do a good job of inserting a spiritual element without hitting your readers over the head with a Bible.

Weaknesses

Narrative: Although you have written some great scenes, too often you rely on exposition and summary. You'll tell us that a character makes a decision to do something, and then instead of showing the action, you'll fast forward a few days, weeks, or months, and then look backward. For example, William meets with John's administrative assistant and discusses how to get John to do what he wants. But we never see this carried out. We only see after the fact.

Antagonist: You don't have a strong antagonist in the story. John could fill that role, but we rarely see him. Most of the time when he's brought into the story, it's others discussing him. Same with Thomas. He could be a minor antagonist early on, but we almost never see him. You need to bring the bad guys into the story. They have very little impact off stage.

Plot: The first 13 chapters have a well-developed plot line, but it gets muddled after that. Too many changes and different things going on. I lost the forest for the trees. I couldn't discern a definitive climax and resolution.

Recommendations:

First, let's revisit the questions you asked when you submitted this to me the first time.

Is there any chance that other people would actually enjoy this?

Yes. Although I said the plot has problems, I still like the overall concept and story. I believe others will, too.

Is there any chance that someone might possibly publish it?

Yes. You write well. As I said above, you have an excellent feel for dialog and characterization. If you fix the plot issues and don't rely so much on exposition and "telling," I believe you will have a publishable novel.

If there is, are there major structural changes that I should make?

Yes. Act 3 of your novel needs a serious rework. There are too many different things happening; we need more pushback from your antagonist (and we need to see it); and we need a clear and definitive climax.

Is this worth polishing further?

Absolutely! Good novels are not written—they're *re-written*. Writing a novel is like running a marathon. (Actually, more like doing an Iron-Man Triathlon!). You've made excellent progress on this. So much so

that I'm able to make suggestions about specifics as opposed to telling you to just cut out 100,000 words or so. Keep working on it.

Notes on Chapters

Here are some observations on specific chapters. I don't go into great detail, but hit on some things that stood out, both good and not so good.

A01

I really liked this chapter. You've got a good flair for dramatic writing, and William's struggle to stay alive and communicate with someone is convincing and believable. The technical details are also intriguing and interesting to a layman like me. However, this chapter weighs in at just under 8,000 words—roughly 10% of your entire word count. Given the direction the rest of the novel takes, that's too much. I'd suggest tightening this up. It's a good chapter, but there's a lot of "fat," i.e. material that could be deleted without hurting the overall narrative. Cut out as much fat as you can and get this chapter down to about 4,000 words and it will be a knockout opening to the book.

A02

Again, a very well written chapter. Good dialog and action. You had me engaged throughout the landing process. All was well—until I learned that this was only a simulation. I understand what you were doing, but this is really tricky in terms of reader reaction. It's kind of like those TV shows where you've invested emotional energy in a story only to find out it was all a dream. Sometimes readers will react negatively when they find out that the scene they just "lived through" wasn't real. I felt a little bit that way. I'm not saying that you should get rid of this scene, but you need to take a page from mystery writers in your rewrite. A mystery writer has to be "fair" with his readers by inserting enough subtle clues so that the really alert reader at least has the opportunity to figure out who the killer is. You might be able to do this by reworking the dialog a bit. Honestly, although the dialog was good, in hindsight as I look back on the scene (knowing it was a simulation), some of the things the characters say don't fit in the context of a simulation.

A03

Again, a well-written chapter. I like how you deal with his fall from grace, the reactions of his team mates, his relationship with his parents, the phone call from John. All good stuff.

You make a 1-year time jump mid-chapter, and that's kind of jarring. I'd suggest that whenever you have a significant time jump (more than a day or two), you break and start with a new chapter. It will help your readers keep track of the timeline.

I like how William goes kind of "off the wall," but it seems you move too quickly through this phase of his story. It's primarily "telling," but it would be fun if you showed me more of this part of his adjustment to a new life.

The possibility of real work with ... is introduced well, and the chapter again ends with a good hook. Makes me want to keep reading.

A04

Very good chapter, all the way through. I love how you handle the interview and the way you introduce Jessica. Good dialog. Good use of setting. Jessica is obviously going to be a strong character, and I like the tension between her and William that shows up right from the start.

A05

Too much exposition here. ... *Quoted scene from novel* ... What follows is 1,000 words of pure exposition. (The chapter's only 3,000 words long, so this is fully 1/3rd of the chapter.)

This is all really important information; however, the problem is that my eyes glazed over while reading it and I found myself skimming rather than digesting it.

Nowadays, readers have shorter attention spans and don't have much tolerance for long expositional passages. (We can credit the Internet and our media dominated culture for that.) I'd suggest introducing the information through William's dialog with Jessica rather than through his personal reflection.

I like how you begin to reveal Thomas's character through William and Jessica's interaction, and again you ramp up the tension between them at the end.

A06

Overall a good chapter. I like how you paint the scene of William arriving at ..., and I especially like the character of Michael. He's well-drawn and interesting. Also, the discussion with other staff members, particularly Devon does a good job of establishing some of the company's problems. Good dialog, and the scene moves well.

A07

Overall, I liked this chapter. Good dialog and it effectively gets us into the "plot" to start doing some work on the side to advance William's ideas. I think the biggest weakness is that Michael is kept pretty much off camera. There's a lot of talk among the characters about how the company is not well run, and sooner or later the VCs will wise up and get rid of Michael and cut off the money. But for me as a reader to be on board with this revolution, I need to see Michael's incompetency clearly portrayed. Otherwise, it's hard for me to accept what William is doing.

A08

Again, great characterization in this chapter. I like the character of Aiden, and how you give each of your characters something that helps to distinguish them. Early hint of romance between William and Jessica is good.

I have suspension-of-disbelief issues with the arrest of Michael and John and the collapse of the company. First, it comes across as a convenient plot device to get those two out of the way so William & Co. can move forward. If you're going to do something like this, you need to take more time setting it up. Referring back to A07, we don't see Michael enough to draw any conclusions about him or his behavior. Also, realistically, this kind of case takes forever for law enforcement to process. It wouldn't just be an overnight thing. The Feds (or whomever) would have come in with search warrants and taken the place apart. I think you're better off going with something that causes Michael to be forced out, perhaps by the VCs.

I do like the idea of Jessica buying the company, but the pricing seems unrealistic. Still, the ongoing tension between her and William is good.

A09

This chapter is mostly exposition, with the characters of Jessica, Mary Johnson, and William reflecting on their respective positions and deciding if and how much they should compromise. As such, not a lot happens that moves the story forward. It would work better if this were developed through actual scenes and interaction, rather than just looking into the characters' heads. You have a little of that between William and Mary, but I'd like to see more. Perhaps show Jessica trying to pitch her ideas and failing rather than just jumping forward two weeks and reflecting back on what happened. Show, don't tell.

A10

Overall, a good chapter. I like how you bring the characters together, and the back-and-forth discussion about what to do and how to go forward, what the company's emphasis should be, etc. I also like how you introduce Jessica to William's family in the process and are slowly bringing them together.

The bit about the ... mission kind of comes out of left field, as it hasn't been mentioned in a while. For reasons that I'll explain in my notes on the next chapter, I'd like to see the ... mission as a minor subplot that runs through the book.

A11

Okay, we finally have John on screen again. This is simultaneously the strongest and the weakest part of your novel. John is a strong and well-drawn antagonist. But he's hardly in the novel at all, and that weakens a potentially strong story.

Readers want to root for your protagonist, William. But they also want to worry about him. You need to have John in the story more, if only because news of his "successes" is like a nagging burr in William's side. The ... mission, and John's "success," juxtaposed with William's "failure" makes for the kind of drama that will take this book to the next level. Consider having a subplot about the ... mission that runs parallel to the events of William's storyline. Could be powerful.

A12

Nicely written. I like the awkwardness of the proposal. Well done.

A13

The reveal that John has been sabotaging William's career and is continuing to do so is another reason that I feel John needs a much-expanded role in this book.

Good dialog and character interaction. I like how Jessica promotes William from boyfriend to fiancé in short order and the conclusion of their scene together. William's resignation and subsequent firing are also good. Ramps up the tension.

My biggest problem with the chapter is the discovery of William's faked medical history. It's hard for me to believe that this wouldn't have been uncovered long before this. I know William did quite a bit of self-sabotage in his anger, but I'm not sure that's enough to overcome my suspension of disbelief. Would John really have had the ability and access to make such a perfect switch of records that it remained hidden for years? Also, this begs the question of why John's brain damage had not been discovered prior to this. ... Wouldn't someone have caught this before now? That's a big plot-hole that somehow needs to be sealed.

A14

Good chapter, overall. I like the idea of someone hacking ... and altering the data My main critique here is that you need to ramp up the sense of dread. Overall, it comes across too casually. The hacking, etc., is a topic for conversation and then the engineers move off into another topic. Nothing wrong with this, but at this point in your novel, you need to be moving toward the climax.

Mary's understated warning in the last sentence needs to be expanded. She, out of all of them, appears to understand the consequences of what has happened and where they are going. Why not have her speak up earlier, and more urgently about what could be coming? As becomes evident in the next chapter, things are getting serious. Make sure that isn't obscured by everything else in the chapter. Otherwise, good stuff!

A15

You begin the chapter with the Senate hearing, looking back at what has happened (FBI essentially shutting down ..., resulting bad publicity, etc.) rather than letting the reader watch it unfold. There is strong potential for drama here. What if you showed the FBI raid on ... and, perhaps negative news coverage about the possibility of William & Co. hacking the data for personal gain? Not saying that you shouldn't have the hearings, but don't jump straight to them. Show us what leads up to them.

Remember: Your reader *wants to worry* about your protagonist(s). So, let them. As for the Senate hearing, it goes on too long and again I found myself wanting to skim over it. The earlier part of the hearing needs to be trimmed substantially. It shouldn't be removed entirely, but it needs to be shortened. The latter part, where Senator ... is asking the questions, less so, because that advances the plot. Whatever happens in your novel should directly contribute to either character, plot, or setting. If something doesn't directly contribute to one of those three, it can be cut out without substantially affecting the novel. Get out the scissors.

A16

The introduction of William's job change to ... is a bit abrupt. I'd like to see him be offered the job and struggle with whether to accept it rather than just opening the chapter with him already having accepted it.

I like the "out of the frying pan into the fire" situation that William finds himself in. He's realizing his ultimate dream of ..., but then finds out that the dream not only won't work, it will be lethal. Add to that the political machinations that he's having to deal with, and we have a good ramping-up of the dramatic tension.

I like the scene in church where William latches on to the "he must increase but I must decrease," concept.

The fact that John is the only one that has the political capital to be able to help William reach his goal is awesome. You're setting the scene for a powerful confrontation between the two. However, again John is kept off stage and the dialog is with his administrative assistant. This quenches the dramatic tension. Get rid of her and have William and John take care of this face to face.

This should be the climax of your book. William and John face off. William must bring himself to forgive everything that John has done, but he shouldn't just let John off the hook. Your readers need catharsis. They've been going through all this with William for the whole book and they want to see him flatten John. William indeed confronts him about the past, but here's where you throw the reader a curve. Instead of punching him William offers to step aside in favor of John. John is skeptical of William's intentions, but William convinces him that he's the best man for the job. William's sacrifice and willingness that John should increase, is highlighted by his actions.

That said, there is still a pretty significant plot hole created by John's psychological problems and amygdala damage. If he were just a jerk, it would be easier to accept William's willingness to defer to him. But he truly has brain damage, is this a realistic solution? Would William want to put the lives of ... in the hands of someone who is mentally ill? Also, would not someone have discovered John's problem by now?

You can accomplish most of the same things in this story simply by having John be an insufferable, even malignant, narcissist. Just a thought.

A17

We're now past the climax into the falling action. Not a lot to comment on here. This is where you're tying up plot lines. I like the scene with Sheryl, but perhaps you might want to explain in more detail, via their conversation, why John was the man for the job. You allude to him dealing with the bureaucracy, but a little more detail about how that would work would be nice.

Good dialog with Ellie about solving the ... problem, but your final line: "Now I just have to convince *them* to do it" kind of muddies the water because as a reader I don't know who *them* is referring to. Instead I'd end that scene with her line, "William," she said as they got out of the car, "I want to see this when it happens."

I like William's return to ..., but the video conferencing is getting a bit old. You might try to paint the scene differently.

Nice secondary conflict as the members of ... try to grapple with what to do now, and William's last line in the chapter: "Mmm, I suggested that we do what we're really good at—recycling," is a great way to end the chapter.

A18

Continuing the falling action and tying up plot threads. This chapter is a bit on the long side. Keep in mind that after the climax, reader interest drops off rapidly, e.g. the multiple "endings" in *Lord of the Rings*. You need to wrap things up a bit quicker.

Because of the time jumps, I'd suggest breaking this chapter into multiple chapters, with each time jump starting a new chapter. That will help a bit. Short chapters are easier to work through.

Some of the conversation gets a bit tedious, and it's not always clear exactly where ... is going and what it's accomplishing. How does this tie in to "recycling"? Make it clear for your reader. The landing scene near the end of the chapter needs to be expanded.

A19 – Epilogue

There's no real need for this to be an epilogue. Since it begins with an 8-year time jump, following the pattern of the previous chapter. I'd say just have it be a final chapter, particularly if you break up chapter 18 as I suggested.

Since I suggested getting rid of ... earlier, it might be effective to have John be the one who contacts ... for help (even if he does it in such a way as to try to conceal his identity). That way you complete John's character arc and give the reader a little poetic justice. John ultimately (perhaps even grudgingly) needs William's help in the end.

Nice way to tie things up.