

Here is an abbreviated (and generalized) version of a feedback letter I gave a mentee after a first read of their Young Adult fantasy manuscript:

Dear (author),

Thank you so much for putting yourself out there and sharing TITLE with me! As was evident in your sample, the writing throughout is precise and arresting. You are particularly good at evoking mood and tone, and capturing the spooky/eerie quality of the setting. The ghosts, the stars, all of that stuff is enchanting. It makes the manuscript a joy to read. As I stated earlier, I think you have the chops to get this ready for submission.

The work to me, moving forward, lies in raising the stakes in the plot and character development. I feel like the elements are there, and just need refinement.

Overall, I think there are three areas to think about:

1. Narrative structure: I got lost at points in the manuscript with the flashbacks. I think things could be straightened out. And this would strengthen some of the relationships, specifically between (character list). This will also strengthen the core emotional journeys and stakes of the story. The question that could guide you is this: when is the most effective moment to reveal information, and when will that information feel earned within the story and the character's arc? Sometimes holding back the details doesn't necessarily keep us in suspense as much as make the previous scenes less suspenseful, because we don't really know why characters feel the way they feel. I'm not saying don't use the flashbacks. The goal is not only to be as clear as possible, but to maximize the emotional stakes in each scene. Also, some of the flashbacks were long and even spanned chapter breaks, and I began to get confused about when the present was. So as an overall note I think you could restructure and minimize the amount of time jumping.

(ALL THAT SAID: because so much the story involves poisoning and drugging, another option is to make it MORE flashback and time-jumpy, with an unreliable narrator who can't keep it all straight, but that is quite a different style of story. But if that was what you were going for, we can talk about how to get there instead)

2. Main character arc: I think you could push deeper with (character's) emotional journey. You have a lot of excellent material to work with. I love that she is so adept at --, and also has a deeper mystical connection with the spirit world. Her relationship with her mom is complicated and I think could be more deeply explored. She's in this trap because of her mom; might she have more teenage anger at all that Mom has put her through? On the flip side, as it stands now, I don't think there's enough of Mom on the page to understand what motivates her. I think bringing all of this into balance, and thinking through how (character's) relationship with Mom might evolve and change, can really elevate (character's) journey.

Another guiding question: what does (character) really learn/accomplish by the end? At the moment, it's a bit hard to tell. A lot happens to her without her really taking the reins of her destiny. Is there a way that she could do this more? Or a compelling reason why she is unable to do so? By the end, what has

changed? What has she learned? We all want to escape this prison castles of our teen years, these identities that have been inherited and that we grow to reject, even powerful ones like (character) has.

3. Lastly: what is this story about? I'm aware that's kind of a vague/frustrating sounding question, but what I mean is where do you see the emphasis of this story being? To me, it seems to be a story about a girl finding agency while working against both a patriarchal and dynastic system. But then there is a lot here about power and addiction and its different, damaging faces. And (character) with her particular skills, is at the center of it. This castle in many ways mirrors an opioid-addled town, or an allegory for our dependence on phones to enhance our reality. These are just ways that you might think about what your story represents, which will inform the character arc and structure questions above.

Okay that's probably enough for a round of revision! Nice work!

Happy New Year!

Kevin