

Sample beta reading feedback report

This document contains excerpts from real feedback reports delivered to clients over the years. They have been anonymised and, in places, edited for length. Where whole clauses are left out, this is indicated with bracketed ellipses. Otherwise, the excerpts appear as originally presented to the author.

The excerpts have been sorted into relevant sections and sub-sections, which reflects how your feedback report is likely to be structured. The topics covered herein should give you a good idea of what to expect from your report, with regards to what I feedback on and how I do it.

It is worth noting, however, that a report may not cover every single one of these topics, but nor are these the only ones that *could* be covered. But what you see here is broadly representative of what I tend to focus on in my reports.

If you would like answers to specific questions about your manuscript, or if you want to ensure I feedback on a particular topic, please don't hesitate to let me know. I am also happy to follow a template of your creation if that is your preference.

Feel free to contact me on lucafossum@gmail.com with any questions or comments.

READING REPORT FOR

[Manuscript title]

by [Author]

1. Overall impression

Story-wise, this is a really strong draft, displaying lots of good storytelling instincts; I have some niggles and suggestions, but generally the story is in a very good state (see section 2). Craft-wise – that is, when it comes to the writing itself, to the quality of the prose, descriptions etc. – I believe that the manuscript would benefit from another round of revision with close attention paid to this aspect. (see section 3).

As I've already let you know, I enjoyed this a lot! I love your main character, your writing is strong and the story deals well with some difficult topics. That said, with further reading and consideration I've identified some possible areas of improvement, the most important of which I think is the character of [protagonist] – who is lovely but, for me, lacks an arc and significant flaws.

This is a manuscript that you have clearly put a lot of thought into. The premise is intriguing and there's lots of good bits of observation. It has the potential to be a very thought-provoking and touching novel. Unfortunately, for me, in its current iteration [title] ultimately fails as a *story*: many things happen, but without an underlying sense of direction, they feel inconsequential. My key piece of advice would be to start by mapping out [protagonist's] character arc and let that inform your plot and help give it direction.

2. Content: plot, characters, structure etc.

2.1 First impressions

For the first few pages, the narrative is driven by our curiosity for finding out what on earth this job of [protagonist's] entails. But beyond that, I think we need a bit more of a hook to retain the reader's interest. Yes, there is the mystery of [X] but because dealing with these difficult cases is literally in [protagonist's] job description, it starts to feel a bit mundane. There is little indication that there is anything *particularly* odd or important or fascinating about this case, so it becomes just another day on the job. And while it may be a curious job, reading about people going about their routine is not necessarily the best way to hook readers.

Moving on to the second paragraph. While the temptation to explain is understandable, I think this five-sentence excursion into [protagonist's] past at this point is unnecessary at best and distracting at worst – because it's not now, so it grinds to a halt any momentum gained in the first paragraph. Could its essence be boiled down to one or two strong sentences?

I liked the introduction to [protagonist], seeing him in action and with a goal, already painting a picture of his personality. I liked the way you showed his resourcefulness; the way he sees opportunity where other people see nuisance. Beyond that first scene as well, the opening is strong, already showing conflict and building towards the introduction of the main conflict (i.e. [protagonist and new friend] on the run). I've raised some minor points in the annotations and some of my comments below could potentially affect your opening chapter(s), depending on what you make of them, but the basic structure of it works great.

If I have an issue with the opening chapters, it's that it's a little light on things actually *happening*. This is a danger of opening a story with your character waking up in the morning and why writers are often warned against it: you're describing his routine, nothing new happening, no interactions (except in flashback), no conflict, and so there isn't much of a story hook. It can be helpful when drafting, to get to know the character and get into a flow, but for the reader it can slow things down tremendously.

2.2 Main character

Speaking more broadly of [protagonist's] whole arc, I think there's some great stuff here: she's clearly challenged throughout the story, there's a past that affects her now, and she's quite plainly not the same person at the end as she was in the beginning. Yet for some reason it doesn't fully come together for me and I finished the story not 100% satisfied, not quite certain what the takeaway was. I guess I

feel that even though there's definitely drama and conflict and so on, it's ultimately a little unfocused. There's an external focus in the relationship between [love interest] and [protagonist], definitely, but the internal one is a little harder for me to pin down.

Mostly, and I think this is the heart of it, he just reads as someone who feels *stuck*; stuck in a loveless marriage, in a job he doesn't appear to particularly enjoy (at least not anymore) but fights for, because what else is there? And I can sympathise with that. It doesn't make me want to excuse or encourage his behaviour, but it does help me understand it, and I could sense that the whole narrative was moving towards getting him *unstuck*. And in that sense, then, [protagonist's] being unlikeable becomes purposeful, part of the entire point of the story, and not a flaw in the writing. And that's a whole lot different than reading a story wherein the author thinks the protagonist is likeable but doesn't get it across.

I like [protagonist] a lot; such a kind, generous soul. I'm particularly happy as well to see a hippy/new age/pagan-type character written with such care. So often these characters become caricatures and/or that side of them is used to show how kooky or quirky they are or that they're a charlatan, out to deceive people. But [protagonist] feels rounded and whole, her love for nature genuine, her habits presented matter-of-factly; of course, other people question her on plenty of occasions and think she's weird, but the narrative never does. And though she's an airy, breezy sort of person who stares out of the window when she's in class, she nevertheless feels grounded in reality. I can't tell you how much I appreciated reading a character like that.

I'm intrigued by [protagonist's] relationship with [friend], though I'm not sure how to characterise it. Their connection seemed to go beyond that of "mere" friendship [...] but I can't quite decide if I see [friend] as a sort of stand-in for [protagonist's brother] and [protagonist's] affection for him as big-brotherly, or if you are hinting at a budding romance between them. [...] Either option could work well, but a stronger sense of just how we're meant to read their relationship would be helpful.

2.3 Supporting characters

[Supporting character] is pretty well characterized as the annoying little brother. I wouldn't mind knowing a little more about him – how old he is, for one – and to see some more of his sibling dynamic with [protagonist]. Is she ever not annoyed at him? Is there a softer side to their dynamic? Obviously it's not going to be a story focus, but any little things you can do to deepen their relationship would be welcome. I'm a sucker for a nuanced sibling relationship!

As I mentioned in the first report, I would, however, love to get a better feel for precisely why she was being so unpleasant and what makes her come around in the end, though I appreciate that she's only a minor character who has mainly been operating in the background, so a sense of proportion here is obviously important.

But it feels like you're trying to do too much, going in too many different directions with too many different characters; it feels a little scattered at times, a little unfocused. In the process your protagonist gets short-changed, because all the time you spend telling us about other characters, especially when it doesn't directly affect the plot – I'm thinking especially of [supporting character] and the lowdown on his background we get soon after meeting him – is time you could have spent developing your protagonist further.

2.4 Plot, structure and pace

As the manuscript stands currently, you've arrived at a structure that works, i.e. alternating between the two timelines. It's basic, but familiar and comfortably predictable to readers. I also really liked that a few times a now-chapter would reference something I'd just read about in the previous then-chapter. This helped to provide some cohesion, a sense that the two timelines hadn't merely been written separately, then cut up and mindlessly slapped together, which in turn builds the reader's trust in you as an author.

I like that, though it's wrapped up in all these science things, dodgy researchers and even romance, the story is essentially that of a woman learning to stand up for herself and be her own woman. Simple, but so important! I loved some of the themes you layered in, e.g. the pressure from society with regards to relationships (get a boyfriend > get married > have a kid > have another) and the idea of [protagonist] needing to leave [husband] for the right reasons.

Moving on a bit, it struck me that [protagonist's] first goal is achieved rather easily, without much conflict or drama, which makes the opening perhaps a little on the slow side. Have you considered the option of simply opening the story on her first day of school and just filling in the background as needed?

If I have one main issue, I think it's that [protagonist's] anger at [husband] over the [supporting character] thing seems to hinge on her not actually reading the text conversation on [husband's] phone. While I do commend you for planting the seed earlier on that [protagonist] does not always read even her *own* messages if she fears she can't deal with them, I still found it a little frustrating to read,

because the solution is so simple: read the bloody conversation. I'd suggest one of two things: (1) strengthen the internal monologue around [protagonist's] choice to not read the conversation, helping me to understand why she wouldn't want to confirm what she's already suspecting anyway, or (2) make it so she doesn't *have* a choice, e.g. she gets interrupted and doesn't get another chance to look at [husband's] phone.

The pacing is generally quite slow, though I don't think this is a bad thing. It's not a book you read to get answers and 'oh god, what's going to happen next', but rather it's one to be experienced and savoured. I certainly didn't have trouble staying engaged, though temperaments do vary, so pace *could* be something to look out for.

The plot, overall, is well-structured. It's a "quiet" sort of story, in that there isn't much external conflict and it is content to let the characters almost just go about their lives and see what happens. Yet there *is* a clear sense of progression – both in the main storyline of the [protagonist/love interest] relationship and in the various subplots that you manage to keep a handle on – so it never really feels meandering or aimless.

2.5 Setting

There's generally a good sense of place whenever [protagonist] goes traveling. [...] However, the bits that are set closer to home feel less clear to me. I don't have a clear sense of his house or the neighbourhood it's in, where it is in relation to his work, or anything that tells me it's set in [region] rather than anywhere else in the UK. Perhaps it's difficult as the book is obviously [protagonist's] POV and he's probably less likely to make note of his everyday surroundings than when he goes traveling, but if you can find a way to develop his home setting a bit more, I think that could really boost the story – particularly if you can use it to heighten that sense of feeling stuck and trapped, e.g. having [protagonist] be irked by the familiarity, the sameness, of it all.

One of the things that really stood out to me was the level of detail and attention paid to characterising 19th century London. I'm no history buff so I can't judge how accurate any of it is, but I can tell you that it certainly *felt* accurate as I was reading it [...] That said, at times the information is, to me, presented a little too much like a lecture. The lengthy descriptions before the scenes themselves often felt a little "here's what you need to know for context before I can move on with the story". They felt separate from the story, rather than being part *of* the story, e.g. coming about as a result of characters moving through the world or talking to each other.

However, more generally, a clearer description of the setting might be helpful. Primarily, it wasn't entirely clear to me just what sort of town or city the story is set in. The narrative mentions that [protagonist A] lives rurally, yet not too far from [protagonist B], who in turn seems to live near a mall – all of which, when put together, sounds a bit inconsistent to me, at least without further explanation.

Of course, the setting isn't that central to the story, so you only need to go so far with it, but knowing a little more than that it's a village in rural [UK county] would really help the immersion. How rural are we talking? 100 people? 1000? Is it far from any bigger towns? What kind of house/neighbourhood do they live in? Does she travel to a neighbouring town/village for her various activities? Etc. Anything you can do to give the reader a bit more of a sense of the place.

2.6 Themes and subjects

I really like the fact that [protagonist] isn't just recently divorced, but she's also a mom, which is something you can't erase or leave behind you. I liked how you address the very real implications of that, how her life and her interests aren't as "exciting" as those of [love interest] and his friends, her struggling to be okay with that. I wonder if you could even emphasise this aspect a bit more? I.e. not just as a past that affects her now, but as something that is tangibly *still* part of her life, complicating her relationships.

So essentially, I think, it's that word *anchor*: making sure that the religious- and faith-related themes are anchored in – motivated by, justified by – external events and/or the characters' internal landscape. At the moment, it comes close to feeling superimposed on to the story, rather than feeling like it's inherently *part* of it.

2.7 Ending

Part of me wanted more from the ending [...] But on reflection, I think it's quite appropriate that you don't go there. It's an understated book without lots of bells and whistles, and the ending – this simple choice he makes to leave the airport – is very suitable in that regard. It's clear that he's making a choice, and though he doubtless has many more big choices to make, this is him starting to take control of his life, to stop waiting for his life to begin. The details aren't that important.

With regards to the ending, by which I mean the epilogue onwards, I'm not entirely sure what to make of it. Am I to take it that [character] *was* [love interest] somehow? Why did he disappear? Why does [protagonist] smile in the final paragraph? It left me a bit confused, to be honest!

2.8 Genre

I don't think I've ever read a YA novel in this style. They're usually (though not always) told in 1st person or 3rd person limited, meaning that each scene is experienced through the eyes of a single young adult character. Here the POV is omniscient, *and* we spend a lot of time with adult characters, which means that it didn't read like a typical young adult novel. This doesn't mean that you can't possibly do it, but I do think it'll present difficulties for you if you want to publish traditionally. An omniscient POV by its very nature creates a distance between the reader and the characters, making it more difficult to create emotional investment, which I think is especially key with young adult literature. You want that young reader to identify with your protagonist and experience the world with them.

With regards to the sex scenes, I would note the following:

(a) The first one is very dark, and it's not sex so much as it is rape. That's obviously the point, but I wonder if you could save [protagonist A] before too much happens, making it clear that it *would* have? While you can certainly get away with a lot of adult themes in YA, the general mandate is that if you're going to show it graphically, it has to be *necessary*, and with that in mind, I can imagine that a potential publisher might ask you to tone this bit down.

(b) The second one, while much less graphic and disturbing, could perhaps also benefit from a small rewrite where the focus is more on [protagonist B] internal sensations and what the act means to him (love, connectedness etc.) and less on the physical details of positions, thrusting and body parts.

3. Craft: quality of prose, writing style etc.

3.1 Mixed and general observations

Your story, I feel, relies too heavily on narrative summary. In some cases, these are things that could perhaps be reduced or cut entirely from the story (e.g. does it really matter precisely how they get from A to B to C on their travels?), but in many other cases they are things that could really benefit from being dramatized, *shown* to the reader. In the annotations, I've highlighted some sections where I most keenly felt the need to be allowed to experience events with [protagonist] – typically, they are moments of conflict, important choices or plot developments.

Filter words distance the reader from the action and can often be a warning that the sentence itself tells where showing might be better. Examples include (in my opinion) "he doesn't seem to mind" at the top of page 4 and "I start to feel self-conscious about what I said," at the bottom of page 9. Why exactly does she conclude that he doesn't mind? What does the self-consciousness actually feel like or manifest itself as?

Overall, your prose and writing style reads as quite confident and accomplished. Sentences flow well, with good variation in structure and length, nice rhythm – though one thing I did notice was your relatively frequent use of the "there is/are" construction. This isn't the biggest sin, by any means, but it is generally accepted in writing circles that forms of to be are to be avoided wherever possible. Of course the "there is/are" construction isn't the only place these will turn up, but I find that they're a easy place to start and that editing these sentences to use active verbs has an immediate effect on the writing, making it fresher and more dynamic.

I really enjoyed your writing style and [protagonist's] voice. It's breezy, conversational, lightly humorous and just all-round a joy to read. You clearly have a strong grip on and knowledge of what you can do with language, voice and rhythm, which means as a reader I immediately trust you and want to follow you through this story.

I was particularly impressed, however, with the way you presented all the details to do with [protagonist's] job: I don't know if you have personal experience in this field, if you've done an astounding amount of research or if you're incredibly good at bluffing, but it came across as wholly believable, from office politics to product details. I bought all of it. Not only that, but you managed to describe it all without boring me or letting me feel like I was being constantly expositated at: you just had [protagonist] going about his business and let us pick things up as they happened.

The first thing that struck me was how enjoyable your writing style is. I like that it's kind of, I guess, "light", that there's a bit of a humorous edge to it [...] but at the same time the language and sentence structure feel perfectly appropriate for a fantasy setting. I've read other books that I think tried so hard to sound authentic to their medieval settings that the narrative ended up dull and impenetrable. But you strike a really nice balance here. The flow and rhythm of the narrative is generally also good; e.g. putting a sentence like "They weren't alone." in its own paragraph has an subtly different effect than if you'd put it at the end of the previous paragraph (where, logically, it could have just as easily gone) and you clearly know this.

Finally, in some places the narrative tells us things that are actually already shown in dialogue and action. For example, on p. 2 "His voice startles me, and I jump." You can just put "I jump" as the context makes it clear that she's startled and that it's because of his voice. And a moment later "He's instantly apologetic", but the dialogue that follows makes that clear as well.

3.2 POV and voice

Your POV characters are primarily [protagonist] and [love interest], meaning we see the action through their eyes and know what they know. However, on quite a few occasions you dip into the mind of someone else in the scene, reporting something that only they know. This wouldn't be too much of a problem if the viewpoint you had chosen was omniscient, but as you mostly seem to be going for a close third-person POV, the result in these instances is what is known as "head-hopping", a very jarring experience for the reader.

And the choice to have three very different POV characters was an excellent one in order to get across a breadth of experience. [...] That said, I'd love to see the three narrator POVs read as a bit more stylistically distinct from one another. Granted, they're not 1st person narrators, so you don't need to go all out with incredibly distinct voices – but as you write in close 3rd, you do have the opportunity to work with voice a bit. Change up the words and phrases used, length of sentences etc. This will liven up the prose and strengthen your characters.

However, I do confess to struggling a bit with the POV insofar as that I found the voice a little flat. First person POVs provide so many opportunities to characterise the narrator simply through the way that they speak and interpret their surroundings, yet personality-wise the narrative here feels like it could have been written by almost anyone.

3.3 Dialogue

As far as your UK characters go, you're also doing really well, I think. I honestly couldn't really find anything that felt "off". No over the top repeated phrases as you'll sometimes get when non-Brits write British characters or strange attempts at phonetic spelling. Your approach is more subtle – e.g. the use of words like "knackered", "crisps" and "mum" in the dialogue – and the result is nicely unobtrusive!

While the dialogue itself is great, I did notice on occasion some sequences of dialogue getting rather long and having few or no dialogue tags or beats. This meant that

- (1) I sometimes got a bit lost and had to circle back to figure out who was speaking. More frequent dialogue tags would help.
- (2) The scene itself was difficult to picture and/or it started to feel too static. This is where inserting more beats could be beneficial: particularly action beats, as opposed to thoughts or description, can help a lengthy dialogue-heavy scene feel more dynamic.

4. Recommendation for further editorial support

A professional line-edit could take your prose even further, but I wouldn't say it's at all crucial. You could safely skip straight to copy or proof-editing.

To a certain extent, what you decide to do should also be governed by what your hopes for the book are. If you plan to continue writing and publishing books, I'd say don't hire a line editor just yet; focus on improving your own craft, get the manuscript as good as you can get it within a reasonable amount of time (i.e. don't overdo it and accept that your first book won't be perfect). [...] If, on the other hand, you think this might be the only book you'll ever publish, if this is the *one* story that is really important to you to get out there, by all means invest all the time, effort and money that you can muster. In this scenario, the focus on building your own skills first and letting each book be a learning experience makes less sense, because you're not trying to build a career: you just want this one book to be as good as it can be. In this case, bringing in a line editor could be a great move, if you have the budget available.

As you're hoping to go traditional with the novel, I probably wouldn't hire a line editor to go over your whole novel; that could be a very costly affair, and a potential publisher might like to do some developmental edits of their own, so much of it could end up being wasted. However, getting some form of more detailed line-by-line feedback with specific suggestions for improvements might prove very instructive and teach you things that you can apply to rest of the manuscript yourself.