

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF CRITIQUES

By Megan Chance

Tacoma Chapter RWA Newsletter, 1996

Copyright Megan Chance
For use only with written permission

Few writers have the critiquing skill or detachment to analyze the problems in their own work—at least within the first few weeks after a book is finished. Several have critique groups or readers they turn to for help. Finding a good reader is valuable for two reasons: It provides a different perspective of trouble spots, and it gives the author some breathing room.

But critiques are highly subjective, and, like everything else in writing, must be evaluated objectively in order to make the decisions that are best for the book. In analyzing a critique, there are several things to keep in mind.

Consider the source:

1) Is this person a good critic? Do you trust their opinion? When the two of you talk about books or stories, do you generally find their perceptions valuable?

2) Does she understand the genre? Or is she strictly a mystery reader who doesn't like romance or a romance reader who can't stand science fiction? What does she read?

3) What is her agenda? Everyone has her own value system. A woman whose strict morality wouldn't accept or sympathize with a heroine who has an extramarital affair is not the best person to read a book where that is a plot point.

Consider the content:

1) Is the criticism objective or subjective? Is it constructive? Someone who simply says, "I hate your heroine," without giving you a reason for that dislike (see #3 above) is not giving you a useful or constructive critique.

What is the impact of their criticism?

1) This is a question only you can answer. Ask yourself if making the changes your reader suggests would stay true to your vision of the book. Look at the themes you've chose to probe in the story and ask yourself if you've explored them in the most effective way.

Before you decide on any changes, ask questions. Ask what your reader thinks is happening in the story. Ask her what her perceptions are about the characters. When she says she doesn't like something, pursue it. Why didn't she like it? Remember, if something doesn't work, it may be because the goals and motivations of your characters are too weak for a reader to believe.

Ask: Does something not work because it's not done effectively? How could it be fixed? What would make it work? Be sure to talk through the problem until you're sure she's saying what you think she's saying.

Many people (editors and agents among them) know when something is wrong with a manuscript, though they may not know what. Because nature abhors a vacuum, they'll tell you the most obvious problem. The trouble with obvious problems is that they're often only a symptom of a deeper ailment. Asking deeper, more probing questions of your reader can help you find the real malady.

Remember that characters and situations do not necessarily have to be sympathetic or likeable in order to be effective. The only caveat is that a reader must be interested enough to read on, and that's possible even if they don't like your protagonist. If a reader responds negatively to an aspect of your story that is meant to be negative, you've done your job. Just make sure you haven't done it so well that the reader puts the book down.

Another thing to be cautious of in analyzing a critique is brilliant criticism. I have a reader who often comes up with brilliant plot twists and character motivations for my stories. The problem is, they aren't my stories; they have nothing to do with my vision. I've been so caught up in her ideas that I've changed direction—and regretted it afterwards.

Finally, know what you're fighting for. You must understand your vision of your book in order to understand when a suggestion threatens its integrity. In *A Candle in the Dark*, my hero is an alcoholic, who, in the original draft, had been drinking for fifteen years. My editor thought that length of time made

him too unredeemable, and asked me to cut it to three years. Because it didn't affect the problem I wanted to address in the story, which was Cain's lack of self-esteem, I had no problem changing it. Another suggestion, which I received from an earlier critique, was to have Cain fight his drunkenness in the beginning of the book. That did change the integrity of the story. A man who fights his addictions does have self-esteem. It was not possible for me to make that change and still maintain my vision of Cain.

A critique can aid you in revision and finishing your work, but only if you take the responsibility for getting the most out of it. It means being honest with yourself, and being accepting of different ideas and ways of thinking.

Be open to an objective viewpoint. Never relinquish your book, but be humble enough to realize that everything you write can be made better, and that although there's a certain level of sacrifice involving in seeing your works in print, you're the one who must stand behind those words when that book is on the stands. Make sure you're proud of it.

Use of this article requires written permission from Megan Chance