

**Best Practices for Critiquing Fiction  
Panel Discussion – November 17, 2010**

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**Theme: Providing Encouraging Feedback for Fellow Writers**

Now that you, the writer, have completed the first draft of your short story, personal essay or manuscript and have edited it to the best of your abilities, what's next? You probably need an objective second opinion or two before wading into the publishing world. We can recommend several ways of achieving this next step starting with reviewing it in a writers' group. Alternatives include using two or three volunteer readers, or getting advice from an writing expert or professional editor. What should you expect from these critiquing methods? Your expectations should be based on the six topics addressed here.

**1. Critiques should be respectful and constructive**

A good critique will use what's known as a sandwich approach, starting with a subjective response focused on what works for the reader in the chapter or story, moving on to what's missing or needs improving and ending with what opportunities are there for development. As a writer, you should be able to identify that the reader has understand your intention in writing the story and knows the genre you've chosen. The critique should be specific as to what areas need to be changed and make some suggestions.

**2. Critiques need to challenge the writer**

Not good enough is not good enough. The critique should push the writer to work hard to make the story better. Would an agent or publisher assessing this story think its good enough? In fact, would he think it's not just good enough, but inspiring or influential

enough to catch the attention of a much wider audience when published? Does the critique clearly identify where this is not happening in the story and make some suggestions on how excitement could be added?

### **3. Tips in evaluating the impact of your criticism when you are a member of a group**

When providing criticism, it's important to recognize that the writer may accept your comments or reject them if she feels they don't fit with her intention or her particular story. If a few other members of the group identify similar problems with the story, then the writer should be able to understand that the comments aren't personal or individual. This will encourage them to take the criticism seriously and to make the necessary changes. If your criticism is different from what everyone else has said, that doesn't mean that it's wrong. There may be reasons why you have a better understanding of the story such as you might write in the same genre. Otherwise, you may be more experienced at critiquing or the story may be intending to generate different reactions from each reader.

### **4. Developing a Good Critique Group**

Probably the most important element of any critique group is that the members be writers themselves in some capacity. This helps in understanding what makes for good writing and in developing sensitivity to the passion and vulnerability that a writer has invested in the story. Members will need to agree on some basic rules or principles that will govern the group so each presenter knows what to expect. At least a general understanding of the structure and key factors of how to write fiction is essential to critiquing. If any members don't have this knowledge, they can acquire it through reading (some examples

will be provided later) or through listening to other members and taking a turn to try out some suggestions during a session.

### **5. Basic Factors for Critiquing**

Members should start with providing their overall impression of the story. Does it work for you? If not, what would you like to see more of? The opening should introduce character, conflict and setting. The premise should be clear to the reader from the first one or two paragraphs. The first page needs to be compelling in order to encourage the reader to continue. Does the story have an emotional impact? The plot needs to hook the reader and develop some intrigue or complexity. Members should have some questions about where it's going next and be able to feel the tension as the story builds towards a climax. Does the ending of the chapter lead the reader on to the next one or fall flat? Can members easily identify the protagonist and is she a compelling character? Does the story come to a smooth close resolving all outstanding conflicts? Does the ending link back to the beginning and the purpose?

### **6. Technical Issues for Consideration When Critiquing**

As a member did you find that each scene and/or chapter was satisfying? Either the narrator or the point-of-view character(s) should have a strong voice. Are all of the characters distinct with a life or their own? Are the relationships between characters well established? Does the prose or grammar need to be cleaned up? Is each scene based on a point-of-view character? If not, does switching POVs cause confusion for the reader? Was the writer consistent with use of either past or present tense?

In summary, the purpose of the Canadian Authors Association includes opportunities for professional development, networking and a community of writers who are at different stages in the process offering their support. Members-only editing and writing groups can help you. You don't have to be published to take advantage of what the association can provide.

**References:**

1. Brian Henry, Editor of Quick Brown Fox Newsletter and Workshops Facilitator
2. James N. Frey, How To Write a Damn Good Novel II
3. Donald Maass, The Fire In Fiction
4. Writer's Digest Magazine