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# the Literary Architect

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Hi Devon,

Thank you so much for entrusting your story to me. I know how hard it can be to turn over your work to someone for critique, and I'm honored that you were willing to take the risk with me. I hope that my comments are helpful to you. All of this is, of course, just my opinion. It's a fairly educated and better-than-average opinion, but it's still just an opinion, and ultimately as the writer you'll have to decide what rings true to you and what doesn't. My own personal philosophy of manuscript reviews is that I don't hold back. I trust that the writer will be able to filter out what is useful and not, what feels true and what doesn't, and won't take anything too personally. The alternative is to kind of tiptoe around worrying about hurting someone's feelings, and in my experience that is beneficial to neither the writer nor the work, both of whom I want to take seriously enough to be fully honest with.

That having been said, I'll dive right in. You are a really good writer, Devon. Your sentences are economical and agile, your use of description and language is clear but fresh, and – with the exception of some occasionally over-lengthy dialogue – you have an excellent sense of timing. You know how long to linger in a description before moving on to action, which allows you to write scenes that move along quickly enough to be engaging to a modern reader while still slowing down enough to give us a clear, vivid, and sensory experience of our surroundings and of your characters. If this seems like a banal compliment, believe me it's not. Many, many people struggle with this, either writing scenes that move so fast the reader feels dizzy, or lingering for over a paragraph describing a doily.

Your descriptions are especially well done, and I've made a few notes on your manuscript to show you what I mean. I wish I could've marked every place that I was impressed, but my hands would've gotten sore inserting comments. I mention this especially because of your comment on your worksheet that you wanted me to look for “sloppy writing.” A manuscript can always benefit from a good, thorough pass in the final stages of editing to trim unnecessary words and freshen up the language, but I wouldn't

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worry about that right now. I suspect that at least part of the reason you haven't finished this manuscript is because you suffer from the same thing I do, which is wanting to go back to the beginning and edit and revise on the sentence level. But, as you will see in this letter, your manuscript is not suffering on the sentence level but rather the story level, and I would encourage you to – for now – abandon any sentence-level editing on the first part of your story and move on to composing the rest of your draft. Besides the fact that your story is working well on a sentence level, once you get to the end of your story and discover what it's really about, you're going to end up changing a lot of this stuff in the beginning, anyway. I'm sure you've discovered this with other stories you've written.

That being said, I've done a few examples of line editing for you, just so you can get an idea of the kinds of things you might want to look for in your final stage of revision. I don't include exhaustive line edits in my manuscript reviews, but I thought you might like to see what it looks like. In the future, if you want someone to line edit your entire manuscript, I can probably recommend someone for you to work with.

Now let's talk about your story. At its core, it seems to me that *The Wall* is an adventure story. Our protagonist leaves her comfortable life behind, crosses a very real, although fairytale-like, barrier, and enters into another world where she sees a lot of wild things and meets a lot of new people, and in the process learns something about herself. It's a classic journey, and there's a reason that so many books – adult and children alike – follow this path. *The Phantom Tollbooth*, which you mentioned, is a great example. *Alice in Wonderland* is another. It's pretty standard in these stories for our protagonists to end up in a new world more or less by coincidence. Alice follows a rabbit and falls down a hole. The protagonist in *The Phantom Tollbooth* is bored one day and – if I'm remembering this right – enters a mysterious tollbooth and gets transported to another world. Your protagonist Frankie sort of half-unwittingly, half-purposefully crosses the wall and thus begins her journey.

But there's a pretty big, important difference between Frankie and these other protagonists, one that I think you'll agree is making it difficult for you

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to feel like your story is coming together the way you'd like. You even mention it in your worksheet: "Frankie's motivations aren't unclear/consistent enough." I would agree with that, and I would add that – at least from what I've seen of your manuscript and outline – Frankie lacks an clear, external goal to propel her through this new found world.

I'm going to pause here and talk a little bit about internal and external character motivations and why they're so important to a story. I apologize if this is all stuff you know. It's not my intention to bore you or condescend in any way, but I find it's better to err on the side of over- than under-explaining my suggestions.

Internal character motivations are abstract, emotional goals, like wanting to find love or redemption or glory. External character motivations are concrete, tangible goals like winning a beauty pageant, saving the princess from a locked tower, or getting to Mt. Doom to destroy an evil ring. Very broadly speaking, genre fiction and children's stories tend to focus more on external goals (and conflicts); whereas understated literary fiction tends to focus more on internal goals (and conflicts). A well-rounded story, in my opinion, needs both. But it's not uncommon for one to overshadow the other. Whatever direction the story goes – more external, more internal, or both – clear motivations are important because it allows us as readers to gauge whether the protagonist is succeeding or failing to reach their goal in each scene. Not only does it give us some solid ground to stand on – to literally understand what the story is and why each event within it is important – but it contributes in a really important way to things like suspense. And I don't mean necessarily on-the-edge-of-your-seat psychological thriller suspense, but more of a basic interest and engagement in the story, a kind of force that makes us curious about what's going to happen and propels us to keep reading. In other words, suspense keeps us from getting bored. Understanding character motivations also helps us have an emotional engagement with the story. In the realm of suspense, that emotional engagement is a kind of anxiety. But in other scenes, knowing what a character wants can direct us to feel sad, happy, relieved, angry, etc.

Here's a quick example. Imagine how much different the final scenes of

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Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone would be if we had no idea what Harry's motivations were. Say, for example, he was just a random character who had just showed up at Hogwart's and wandered into a basement to find a bunch of flying keys and a chess set. The whole thing would still be medium interesting – flying keys and a chess set are pretty cool, after all. But we are much more engaged emotionally with those events because we know that he's trying to unravel a certain mystery (external goal), and that that mystery pertains to an evil dude who killed his parents (internal goal). Reflect back on Harry Potter and you will notice that external goals dominate. Although Harry's internal goals are present and a very important part of his story, there's always some tangible thing he's after. The Sorcerer's Stone, a horcrux, a golden snitch, etc. And of course the overarching concrete goal that propels him through the entire series: defeating Voldemort.

Because *The Wall* is a middle grade reader book that is an adventure story, I would recommend finding a really solid external goal or goals for your reader to grab onto. Right now, your protagonist appears to have none. Her arc is more of the classic passive character/reluctant hero. Meaning, the events of the story eventually push her into taking sides and actually going after something instead of hesitating and waffling. In a sense, the climax of the story is Frankie actually doing something (From your worksheet: “Frankie must decide in the end whether she will return to her life of comfort, or whether she is willing to break all the rules to make possible a society where her friends can flourish.”).

It totally makes sense. And here's where it gets kind of difficult. Because, really, there are no rules. You can do whatever you can get away with, whatever a reader will tolerate, and I'm sure character arcs of this kind have been successfully done before. But for most readers – especially kids – asking them to commit themselves and follow a protagonist who isn't going after anything specific herself is going to be difficult. I think you know this, because I see places in your manuscript where you're trying to suss out Frankie's motivations and explain them to the reader. As it stands, most of these are internal – her struggle with being a rule follower or rule breaker,

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whether to believe or not believe what she's been told by adults, and her problem with the Empty. But even so none of those are coming through clearly enough for us to understand them as her guiding compass.

Meanwhile, all of the characters around Frankie know exactly what they want. Angel is trying to get her dad out of jail. Raelee wants to overthrow the president and rescue his daughter. The whole scenario is ripe for conflict – a story really gets popping when the protagonist's goals rub up against the goals of those around her – but right now it's almost like Frankie is watching the story instead of actually participating in it, because she doesn't have any clear stakes in the game.

A word of encouragement. Many writers, especially those to whom writing comes easily on the sentence level, have a very hard time pinning down their protagonist's motivation. It's a process. Sometimes it takes me between four and six full drafts before I realize what, exactly, my main character is after. Much like you, I'll set up an entire world with vivid descriptions of places and events and characters, and still be very fuzzy around the edges about why my main character is there. In other words, why it's her story, and not someone else's. So don't be discouraged. I am not in any way saying you should have figured out Frankie's motivation by now. I'm just trying to help you see why it's important – central, even – to the story, and give you some ideas about how you might start figuring it out.

I've made margin notes on your manuscript in the places where I see real clues about Frankie's motivations, both internal and external. Ultimately, it's up to you to decide what direction you want to go in. One of my favorite ways to string together my main character with their motivation and the main plot of the story is to fill in the blanks in the sentence:

[Main character] wants [goal], but [obstacle], therefore she must [quest] in order to [fulfill overall goal of the story].

The formula is pretty rough and definitely not perfect but I find it very helpful.

(Lord of the Rings) Frodo wants to save the shire, but Sauron is gathering his powers, therefore he must travel to Mount Doom to destroy the ring in the fire.

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(The BFG) Sophie wants to defeat the evil giants, but they are more powerful than her, therefore she must convince the Queen to do something or other (I forget) so that she and the BFG can live in peace.

The thing I like about this is that it forces you to make a connection between what the character wants, the plot, and the climax, so that it all hangs together as a cohesive whole. Given some things I've learned about Frankie, here are a few examples of how her motivations might fit into the big story:

Frankie wants to find out the truth about the government and life on the other side of the wall, but she is being lied to by everyone around her, therefore she must join forces with a ragtag pirate crew to get to the capitol and find out the truth once and for all. (In this version, Frankie is a truth-seeker who unravels a mystery. Her parents and her school has lied to her, and when she gets on the other side of the wall perhaps she finds a little more of the truth but even more deception, as you mentioned in your outline, and we follow her as she becomes an active participant in unraveling this deception. In this way, things get more complicated as it becomes unclear who is her friend and who is her enemy.)

Frankie wants to get rid of the Empty, but following the rules is no longer working, therefore she must risk getting in trouble and misbehaving in order to have a more fulfilling life. (This would be more of an internal arc. If it dominated the story, the story would become much more subdued. But you could run it along as a minor parallel to a more external arc.)

Of course, Frankie can have multiple goals, both internal and external. But it will be easiest for readers to follow along if you have one clear external goal that dominates, and for all the goals to be in service to the main one. If you think about Harry, with all of his tangents and adventures, there is always the overarching goal of defeating Voldemort. If he gets derailed it is an event of itself, and he always recognizes it eventually—damn it, we've gotten off track—and then reorganizes and goes forward again. Your story is running on very different themes from the Harry Potter series, but a lot of the same principles apply.

Another note is that, based on your outline, you are really trying to build

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the story where Frankie will be forced to change as a person because of her experiences. I think it can be easy to fall into the trap of the passive character this way, because we imagine that they are changed by experiences – things happen to them, and they transform. But often the best way to show change is with an active character who really wants something and goes after it, and who then encounters conflicts and obstacles that force them to reconsider how they are going about things. In stories, as in life, people don't change until they are forced to – until their old ways are no longer able to get them what they want in life.

Okay, I think I've said enough about all of that. But protagonists, I think, are really key. Most problems in a story can be traced back to the main character. So I really want to encourage you as you are writing forward to keep Frankie first and foremost in your heart and mind, because she is the one who is going to lead us through this amazing world you've created so that it becomes a story rather than an episodic series of events through vivid and awesome locations. In other words: I wouldn't worry about your plot. You've got a ton going on, probably more than you're going to need in the end. The places where it seems confusing or disjointed to you, I would bet, correlate with the places where you don't know why Frankie is there, what she wants, and how she's reacting to it. Because the plot, really, is about how it affects a main character who is trying to achieve what is becoming an increasingly difficult goal. If the character is relating to the events in a way that parallels our expectations and their arc in the story, well, it's weird to say, but it almost doesn't matter what happens. We will become engaged with all manner of absurd and random stuff, because we will see it clearly as either an ally or an obstacle for the main character.

I made some pretty long notes on your manuscript, stuff I would usually address in this letter, about pacing and point of view. And I think I've covered your character and plot, setting, description, and writing strengths. But I want to touch briefly on conflict. Again, I don't think you're having a problem with this, I think it's still coming back to Frankie. There are plenty of obstacles and antagonists in your story, it's just that Frankie is witnessing them rather than being a participant in them. But just be cautious when you

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become more clear about what Frankie wants that you don't let her get it too easily. Your story is clearly not set up to fall into this trap, but it's an easy trap to fall into all the same so I wanted to mention it.

Lastly, I want to make sure I address everything you brought up in your worksheet. I already mentioned what I thought about your concern about your “sloppy writing” – don't worry about it, just keep going – and obviously I've gotten into character development pretty deeply.

You also mentioned “useless back story paragraphs.” I think you actually incorporate back story very well. It's economical and often flows well within the narrative, not slowing it down too much. I've pointed out places where I thought you might change it or move it. Also, sometimes back story is like scaffolding. You need to have it there while you're building the story, but two or three drafts from now you may realize that this information has been so thoroughly incorporated into your characters and scenes that you can remove them. So basically I wouldn't worry about it for now.

“Tone and the reader voice consistency”: Unlike you, I did not notice that your narrator voice or style changed too much. But if you're noticing it and it's bugging you, I would recommend spending some time thinking and writing about who your narrator is. Often, when the narrator's style or attitude is all over the place, it's because we haven't yet nailed down (1) who they are, including their attitudes toward the story and the characters (2) when they are – in relation to when the events of the story took place, that is, are they narrating this story right after it happened, a hundred years after it happened, while it's happening, etc. (3) why they are telling the story (4) why they are telling the story now and (5) what limitations they have in telling the story, that is, whose thoughts they can read, what they know, what they don't know, what they can and can't see, etc. Number three and four only really come into play for a first-person narrator, but the rest will be good to think about. Again, this is something that is also exploratory. Sometimes I get through a few drafts before I really get grounded and consistent in my narrator.

As far as anything that seems inappropriate for your age group, I didn't notice anything, although I'll admit that I am not an expert in middle grade

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fiction. In the event that an agent or editor reads your work, they will no doubt trim anything that crosses the line. But overall it seemed fine to me.

“Plot inconsistencies”: Having only read the first part of this story, it's hard for me to address this, but I will stand by my suggestion that at this point I think most of your plot problems are going to be a direct outgrowth of your issues with character motivation, not the other way around. That is, often the plot is only inconsistent in so much as the character's reaction to the plot is inconsistent. Once you understand who your character is and tie us as the reader in closely with her experience and her reactions based on her goals, you can get away with a lot of wild, otherwise inconsistent stuff without it bothering the reader.

Okay, Devon. I'll stop there. You've got a really exciting beginning here – full of interesting, unique characters; vivid and fantastic settings; and important, under-explored themes. Your story has a lot going for it, and I think it's totally worth finishing! I hope that some of my comments here will help you get out of the hamster wheel and push forward on finishing the rest of your draft. I know the “running in circles” place very well. I also know what it's like to give your manuscript to someone and have it come back with an insane amount of feedback and information. So here's what I'd suggest. Take some time. Read this letter, look over my notes. At some point, read through your entire manuscript again (not just my notes) with some of this stuff in mind. Read the letter again. If your experience is anything like mine, you will find that over time some things I said that didn't make sense originally will start to gel in your mind. And you will start to, probably, formulate some questions or things you want to talk about with me, places you need more clarity. Then get in touch with me and we will schedule a time to sit down and talk. You can make a list of things you want to talk about, or we can just see where the conversation goes, whatever you want to do. I made one version of your manuscript in a Googledoc. I do this mostly for the benefit of out-of-state clients because we do our follow-up session by phone, but you might find it helpful, too. When you are logged into Googledocs, you can make comments in your manuscript right next to mine, with any questions you have, etc. I'm imagining we will meet

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in person, in which case if you want to you can print off the manuscript and bring it to our meeting if there's anything in specific you want to be able to point to.

Thanks again for trusting me with your story, and I'm looking forward to talking with you soon!

Love,  
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