

To: [REDACTED]

From: Renni Browne

Re: [REDACTED] – Preliminary Evaluation

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OVERVIEW

From the opening sentences of this very well written, unusual story, the personality of the narrator jumps off the page. He's wonderfully articulate, cut off from others and his life, unhappy (though he says he isn't), adrift. He has longings for a dark-haired woman in several guises who becomes specific as Dolora, at first glimpsed in a yoga class and then turning up in his group therapy session. When she mentions Dan, her boyfriend, Jim thinks:

Dan? The syllable whacks the air out of my stomach. It is forever an ugly sound, a cure, a ball of phlegm caught in my throat. I imagine this Dan, this man of many boils, skewered on a rotisserie and spinning around, roasting, an apple in his mouth, and I wonder if this proves I am not well.

It's quintessential Toner. On the edge, feverishly imaginative, perfectly capturing his unexpressed feelings. He keeps virtually all of his feelings in your opening to himself.

They seethe just beneath the troubled surface of his mind. At times you give us too much of his interior monologue, but you handle it brilliantly.

Delora is intriguing, mysterious. We don't know why she reacts to Toner the way she does—at first negatively, then ambivalently, then positively--and we enjoy the moves in their prolonged dance.

The group members are sharply limned, at times poignantly, often comically. Madeleine is an overwhelming presence, tying them all together and trying desperately and comically and pathetically to tie up Toner.

We spend much of the novel in Toner's head, and it's an interesting head to be in. His acute powers of observation give us details that put us on the scene. He has a bracingly intellectual, poetic turn of mind. An engaging sense of humor. And his thoughts can be counted on to take surprising twists and turns.

We want Toner to finish his novel, and he does. We want him and Delora to end up together, and they do. Along the way, we're treated to a plethora of finely observed details, thoughts, etc. What we're not given is much in the way of conflict, suspense, or surprises of consequence.

I do understand that you didn't set out to write a conventional plot-driven novel, and I applaud your desire to venture beyond the ordinary. I'm a fan of what's often called the literary novel, which strives to make the reader think and feel in new ways rather than simply sweat bullets or shed tears that quickly evaporate. So I'm certainly not suggesting that you knock off the artsy stuff and clone Tom Clancy or John Grisham.

But in today's extremely competitive market for first fiction, I don't think your novel is likely to find a publisher in its present form. I do think that by strengthening

certain fiction elements you could give it wider appeal without compromising its integrity.

There are two ways to approach writing a novel. You can start with a clear idea of your story, then make up characters to act it out, or you can start with a clear idea of your characters and develop your plot around them. Both approaches have their extremes, with potboilers at one end of the spectrum, and the kind of novels that sell a hundred copies to the author's relatives at the other. You can even start with nothing but your characters and then see what story develops around their lives. ■■■■■ is, primarily, a novel of character.

In either type of novel, the primary purpose should be the same: engagement between your characters/story and your readers. Whatever else you want to do with the novel, without engagement the reader won't be thoroughly satisfied by his or her reading experience. With engagement, you can take the reader's thoughts, emotions, and imagination into brand new territory. This engagement is most likely to derive from your own engagement with the characters and the story.

In order to achieve engagement you have to (a) create characters the reader will care about, (b) tell a story—create a plot—that will produce enough tension in the reader so we care how it comes out, and (c) convey your characters and plot to the reader in a compelling fashion.

Plot is the oldest and most reliable device in the history of fiction for keeping readers involved in a story. A plot and a story aren't synonymous. A story is simply a

series of events, and of course things do happen in [REDACTED]. A plot is a particular story structure, one that has proven most engaging over the span of human culture.

The heart of plot is conflict. A plot introduces the story's central conflict early on. For most of the rest of the story, the plot develops—becomes more complex, gets tenser, raises the stakes, grows or acquires subplots—until, near the end, at the climax, it comes to a head. As a result of the climax, the conflict resolves in some manner—happily or sadly, surprisingly or predictably. The writer then ties up some of the loose ends, not necessarily all of them, and quickly brings the story to an end.

So, the first decision to make about plot is whether or not to have one in the first place. [REDACTED] has only a whiff of plot: blocked writer completes novel; man falls for woman; woman stops resisting him and they end up together. In a novel of character, sometimes the plot consists of the narrator's growing and changing—profoundly--thanks to internal and external changes over the course of the novel. Toner changes but he doesn't exactly grow over the course of the novel. He changes as a result of having his love returned—without Delora he would be just as lonely and unhappy at the end of the story as he was at its beginning.

So [REDACTED] offers very little in the way of plot. There's no strong central conflict—in fact, no strong conflict at all. Delora resists Toner at first, but we know she's going to come around and she does. That's why there's no strong suspense or surprise in the development of their relationship. Nor is there a satisfying resolution to it--when Toner and Delora come together at the end, it's described in such dreamlike terms that their reunion doesn't seem real to the reader.

As for Toner's being blocked as a writer, this plot thread has your character in conflict with himself, which is all well and good. But it's resolved rather easily: one day he feels better about himself and is able to write. There are reasons for this, but they're not really compelling and certainly not dramatic. As for conflicts within the members of the group, they're instantly resolved and minor-league. There's potential for conflict between Madeleine and Toner, but it never really materializes.

The first thing I think you should do is take the logical step of building on what you already have. You can easily intensify the relationship between Delora and Toner, adding conflict along the way—especially at the beginning. This will necessitate your getting to know Delora better, giving her the psychological makeup or background that would lead to her rejecting him, even being hostile to him, when he first tries to ingratiate himself with her. (As you'll see in the Characters section below, I think she needs some work anyway.) You could also add conflict as the relationship develops—the course of true love doesn't have to run so smoothly. And while you're doing all of this, they should say more to each other.

Madeleine and Toner's relationship is another one with seeds of conflict you can easily water. As it is, you have her pursuing him and Toner simply not picking up on it. Why not let her pursuit and his rejection build to a terrific, comic scene in which he foils her definitively and permanently? Or, better, create a subplot in which he sidetracks her by coming up with someone else to fill his place as the object of her affections/obsession? He could use some ingenuity in pulling this off, telling the guy that Madeleine has a thing for him and vice versa, setting up a rendezvous, etc. This needn't

be far-fetched if you make her less unattractive, as I suggest in the Characters section below.

You can also create more conflict within the group. Mix things up more. Let the members of the group talk more, accost or attack each other more, and let Toner get caught in the crossfire. You can do this to comic and poignant effect—you're good at both.

Toner has scenes with Bethany and Sarah, but they don't seem to have much point. There's no real conflict, and there could be.

You can intensify the conflict Toner feels over not being able to write. He should be in agony—most writers find staring at a blank computer screen day after day excruciating. One idea would be to give us some weird sentences of failed efforts on his part—angry, eccentric stuff that doesn't belong in his novel but does reveal his self-disgust, his feelings of impotence. Let him recall, with real joy, what it feels like when the words are flowing, let him mourn the damning of the flow. And let us know something about the novel, what sort of work it is, what his dreams for it are—unless the only thing he plans to do with it is give it to his dad, which is very eccentric, and if that's the case you should make it clear.

In addition to these suggestions for creating more conflict where the potential for it already exists in your story, you need to add plot elements. More needs to happen to Toner in this novel. He needs to get in some trouble, he needs to struggle against obstacles and overcome them—or not. He's an eccentric character, so let him do more eccentric things.

I think it's a mistake to end the novel with a surreal scene between Toner and Delora. As I've suggested, this approach keeps their reunion from being satisfying to the reader, because it doesn't seem real.

SPECIFICS

The exchange between Delora and Toner on page 53 is very effective—the dialogue has edge and bite, though most of the bite comes from her. The scene would be even better if you gave Toner a little more to say. She's nailed him, and I think he'd try harder to overcome that disadvantage than just saying he's working on himself and his days of misbehavior are behind him. Too bland. He's trying to attract a complex, interesting woman who can read him.

In the group session that begins on page 62, Delora isn't mentioned. Toner would of course notice her absence, conclude that she's gone to Italy (she didn't say when she was going, specifically), and have some sort of reaction, but he doesn't even think about her once during the session.

At the beginning of Chapter Five we've been to several group therapy sessions, seen Toner deliver his lines in a play and followed him into a bar, met Bethany, been to a party at his house, etc. We've certainly been privy to a lot of well-written, interesting interior monologue about his life, feelings, obsessions, etc. But all taken together, very little has happened in 84 pages.

In the group therapy session in Chapter Five, Ben says he and Carl killed grubs and worms and fake pheasants. Why not real pheasants and squirrels? That would make

much more sense, and be more interesting. Or maybe they started out with grubs and worms and worked up to killing a dog.

Delora's visit to Toner's to have him look at Rorschach cards is a big letdown for him—and for the reader, too. We need tension in the scene, chemistry between them, dialogue with snap. Movement.

I love the dialogue between Toner and Maria on page 161. His sense of humor is a delight. But you should definitely get rid of the reference to a mistress. That's spelling out the joke too directly, which undermines it. And you let the dialogue run on too long. Watch your tendency to stretch out your effects so that they become repetitive. We get it.

Toner's analysis of Delora's poetry has an interesting effect—it kills it—but it needn't go on for two pages. It's too much. Once you've accomplished an effect, if you keep repeating it, you undermine it. (See my similar comments in above paragraph.)

The letter to Delora that begins on the first page of Chapter Nine is way too long for what it delivers. We just don't need ten pages of Toner's every thought—in fact, the letter reads very much like his narrative summary but is somehow less interesting and becomes tedious. I'd make it a real letter to Delora, filled with feelings about her and just a few observations he really wants to share with her—because they're really funny, or surprising, or odd. Then put anything else that's good in the letter into narrative summary rather than the letter. (And don't italicize the letter—double indent it and use regular type. Italics that run longer than a paragraph are hard on the eyes.)

The scene where Toner tells his parents about Delora is wonderfully moving. And the letter he writes her about the beautiful princess Delora has none of the problems

I mentioned above—it's truly a letter to her, not a kitchen sink of thoughts and observations. And when he writes her about the scene with his mother on page 209, he's sharing something that's important to him and moving for the reader.

CHARACTERS

Toner is highly intelligent, dour, in mid-life crisis (though he hates doing anything clichéd, prizes his originality), cynical, world-weary, perceptive, sensitive, imaginative, creative, eccentric, spontaneous, detached from others, possessed of a wicked sense of humor he often turns on himself.

██████ is enigmatic, remote, intriguing, sensual, sensitive, impulsive, given to flights of fancy—in fact, just plain flighty at times. It's good when a character is intriguing to the reader, but Delora is too hard to fathom for readers to care as much about her as you want them to, or about the course of her relationship with Toner. She's too remote, too hard to figure out. We don't know where she's coming from, or how she really feels about Toner, or why. I think you need to develop her more, and in order to do that you need to get to know her better, understand what drives her, what she most wants and why she can't have it.

Madeleine is predatory, self-deluded, talkative, campy, eccentric, funny (intentionally and unwittingly), fixated on and attracted to Toner. I think you overdo her physical unattractiveness—it would be more effective if she were overweight and aging but had some physical appeal, just none for him. As it is, she's too much a cartoon character. I

also think it's a mistake to make her such a chaotic group therapist. The quotes from *Tuesdays with Morrie* are funny, as is much of the interaction in the group. But let her conduct the group with a modicum of professionalism at times. Toner is too smart to be in a group so wildly unhelpful, and the funny dumb stuff will be all the more effective if it's set in the context of sessions Madeline tries to keep on a realistic professional track.

Carl is a wonderful minor character, and with his fondness for killing "little things" provides terrific comic relief. The interaction between him and Toner is delicious. I do think you might get a bit more mileage out of him at the party where Toner meets him. He's supposed to be protecting the "gear" from the peaceniks, and Toner's guests are drunk and sloppy. How about a funny but alarming incident when some possession of Toner's is threatened and Carl starts to do his thing—wildly, dangerously—and Toner has to divert him somehow.

Lacey, too, provides comic relief. Her notions of what standing up for herself amounts to are funny and touching. (This whole group reminds me of the one from "The Bob Newhart Show," whose sessions made me laugh until I hurt and yet were very moving at times.) I think you overplay her, though, making her an outright idiot, as when she gives Ryan only three cookies when she finds a pair of Annie's panties in his back pocket. Let her progressively make some real stabs—pathetic stabs—at standing up for herself. Maybe she tells him no cookies, no supper, no breakfast.

Ben and Mr. Shoe are too silly, over the top. Don't have the group address Mr. Shoe.

Joe is a good buddy and a good brother, quick with a wisecrack, and always having Toner's best interests at heart. Toner's lucky to have him in his life.

Bethany has braces and **Sarah** has cheek implants—which pretty much sums up their distinctive characteristics. Their interactions with Toner lack intensity.

Mom and **Dad** are well-drawn characters, effective parents for Toner—particularly his mother, whose personality is vivid and engaging.

George makes a good best friend for Toner.

STYLE

Your usually very effective prose is made slightly stiff when you fail to use contractions in Toner's interior monologue. “**It is** my brother Joe on the phone from Cleveland. The Vanik Test is our foolproof way of determining whether **I have** met a soulmate or a dalliance...” Why not “It's my brother Joe” and “whether I've met”? Sounds much more natural. You have Toner characterized as intellectual, literary, philosophical. I don't think you want him to sound stuffy or prissy.

You get carried away with your dialogue at times, letting it become self-consciously literary. You want it to always sound like something people would actually say to one another. Here's an example where you get into trouble (from page 149, dialogue only, Delora speaking):

“This is my heaven,” she says...”This river and these trees and this solitude—heaven, my dark heaven....Alabaster. The moonbeams disappear into my flesh and turn my skin to alabaster. I love that word: ‘alabaster.’ Say it.”

Let her have her alabaster, but tone down some of the surrounding airy-fairy language. (Let me add that overall, this scene between the two of them plays beautifully. I particularly loved the pine-cone golf.)

Break up paragraphs that run as long as the ones on page 171 and 172. Too much text in a block is off-putting to the reader, hard to assimilate.

RECOMMENDATIONS

I’ve said that [REDACTED] plot needs serious strengthening and suggested that you add conflict, suspense, and surprises, getting Toner into trouble, putting obstacles in his way, etc. I can’t give you ideas for how to do this, but if you want help with it, we have an editor—Peter Gelfan—who’s a novelist himself, and I’m sure he could throw a lot of balls you could run with your way. He’d need to read the novel and prepare a memo. I don’t know how much this would cost, but Peter could probably quote you a fee after reading this critique, and I don’t think it would be too steep.

If you don’t want to take this step, I suggest that you revise the manuscript along the lines I’ve suggested in this memo and strengthen the plot—and Delora’s character—

as much as you can on your own. Then send the draft to me for a reread (\$2.00 a page). I'll let you know how you've done and make any further suggestions that occur to me.

In the meantime, if you have any questions or comments about the points I've raised in this Preliminary Evaluation, just e-mail me at rdb@editorialdepartment.com or telephone me at (423) 639-4242.

You're a good writer, and I've enjoyed every minute of my work on [REDACTED]. I absolutely believe that with some further hard work on your part it will be an even better story with a reasonable shot at getting published.