

To: Scott Pratt

From: Renni Browne

Re: *Angel Among Us*

Manuscript Evaluation

OVERVIEW

Everybody who's cynical about our justice system or hates lawyers can find plenty to enjoy in *Angel Among Us*. (Which gives you a potentially huge market.) Even its lawyer-hero hates lawyers, at least most of them. And his amount of faith in the justice system wouldn't overflow a teacup.

Cooter would feel a little better about his profession if he had an innocent client to defend, but when he finally thinks he's got one, turns out he's wrong about her. (Of course, the reader knows this long before he does.) A victim of sexual abuse, she murders Tester after he rapes her, then castrates him. Cooter is entertainingly undaunted by the prospect of making her a sympathetic witness, even though there are bound to be men on the jury. Even though Angel is uncommonly pretty, and there are bound to be women on the jury. Cooter's remaining undaunted by the victim's castration and Angel's beauty amounts to insouciance, and it's part of his appeal.

He's an interesting, complex guy. He has PTSD from a horrific wartime experience, a buried traumatic childhood memory of his sister's rape, self-contempt, and a profound contempt for his profession and the system that makes it possible for him to get his guilty clients off. Not your everyday legal-thriller hero.

Virtually no one outside Cooter and his family comes off well in this novel in which the legal system perhaps comes off worst of all. Angel is set up as a sympathetic victim—she's been horribly abused ever since her adoptive parents had their own children—but like so many victims of sexual abuse she's emotionally maladjusted. She's childlike with Voltiere and Cooter. She not only murdered the evangelist, she'll probably kill the next man who tries to force himself on her, without a twinge of conscience.

Tester is a loathsome hypocrite, a drunken rapist who practically asks for his fate. Voltiere cares about Angel but is greedy and essentially a murderer, since he orders the hit on the

witness who could nail Angel. Angel's parents are monsters. All the mobsters are appropriately wicked. Julie Hayes is a nice girl, bless her heart.

You're a good writer, and your plot gives you a chance for plenty of drama that crackles, plenty of suspense, plenty of surprises. But there are a lot of legal thrillers out there, and they're not all you're up against. Count on it: readers in your market all watch "Law & Order" and all the other TV shows and movies in the genre. A lot of what you've written, including the cynical slant, is going to be familiar territory to them. Factor in the fiercely competitive market for first novels, and you need to do some rethinking before rewriting. It's worth it, Scott. Because I can see a book with a shot at the brass ring here. It's just not there yet.

The key to success is Cooter. If he's at the center of your plot as it stands now, even if you make the improvements I suggest in the Specifics sections below, I don't think that's enough to get you where you want to go. But if he's a riveting character the reader has a huge stake in, if he's tormented part of the way and thoroughly engaging throughout, and if we share his concerns deeply as we move through the story so that the novel is as troubling as it is entertaining, you could have what looks to publishers like a potentially big book.

Let's take a look at Cooter. There's obviously a great deal of Scott Pratt in him, and I think you need to draw on even more to make him a riveting character. Did you ever have any idealism when it came to the law, ever feel that in practicing it you might be helping some people while making money? Maybe you didn't, but if that's the case I want you to use your imagination and give Cooter ideals he lost. He left law school thinking he was going to make a difference while making money. He took a lot of DUI cases not just because there was good money in them but because he thought Tennessee laws were unfairly tough. And he needed to be in a profession where he helped people.

Why? I want you to let the reader know earlier about his uncle's sexual abuse of his sister, and the effect of the incident should be clear: he was too young to prevent it but feels nonetheless that he should have. She's his sister. He should have protected her. Case closed.

Why do we need to know this earlier? Because it's really important that he believe Angel is innocent. From the beginning he should assume a background of abuse (he needn't know the details, he's just going on instinct). If he can get her off, that helps him with his feelings about his sister's abuse. At a point when he's beginning to have doubts about Angel's innocence, he can find out that her adoptive father abused her sexually, and that knowledge can interfere with

his doubts. (What would raise the doubts would be his finding out that Julie Hayes has disappeared.) You should make a huge crisis out of his learning—or strongly suspecting—the truth, and I think it should, at novel's end, be enough to precipitate his quitting his profession.

You give Cooter PTSD from taking part in a mass murder, which feels all wrong. First, it's the wrong war. It's important to set this novel in present time, and if Cooter were in Korea he'd be old—given Cooter's age, it would have to have happened in the Middle East. And it's the wrong kind of incident. Whatever military action caused the PTSD, it should be a case of his not being able to save a buddy—not his fault, of course. But we've all seen this kind of incident and effect in hundreds of novels, TV dramas, and movies, and I'm not sure you need it.

Cooter should feel better about himself until doubts about Angel start creeping in. Not having nightmares, at his most charming, feeling good for a change. Enjoying his wife and son. Cynical about the law, his colleagues, and judges, but not bitter. Then the flies in the ointment—doubts about Angel—start showing up and though he tries to ignore them, he's too smart not to grasp their import.

All the while he's preparing his case, we should be hearing about cases of his (perhaps one big murder case in the past) and of other lawyers' cases in which innocent clients got off, also other injustices. Draw from your rich treasury of stories in which the law functioned illegally. A brushstroke here, a story there.

To summarize: make Cooter a charming, genuinely likeable, entertaining, smart character who hates his work and indeed his profession but went into it to make a difference in the world, then lost his ideals. It means a great deal to him to have an innocent client, not just because this is rare but because of what happened to his sister. I'd have him like Henry. When he starts doubting Angel the pressure on him starts mounting. Cracks appear, then widen in his psyche. You want the reader to really worry about him.

Other characters, too, can be developed more fully. You can really do something with Angel's lack of affect, so characteristic of sexual abuse survivors. Make her emotionally damaged to the point where she can't give or receive true affection, can't relate normally to people. You've got the beginnings of this in her characterization, with her childlike quality. I just want the reader to be able to connect the dots to sociopathy from what you show us.

Voltiere doesn't have to have mob connections, which can't help but be stereotypes. How much more interesting if he was initially attracted to Angel, but her odd, childlike

personality caused his feelings to shift into fatherly gear. He loves her, she can't love him back. Show us a more-decent-than-not man fiercely protective of her—so much that he's willing to kill to keep her from spending her life in jail or getting the death penalty. Figure out a fresh way for him to have somebody kill her and her parents. Much more interesting than a mob hit.

Angel's adoptive parents are so monstrous they're cartoon villains. Unexpectedly having children of their own is the only motive you supply for viciously abusing a beautiful little girl. Monstrosity doesn't cut it. Make them meth addicts, make them mentally ill, make them something that motivates their behavior.

What I've done in the section below is give you a sense of how each chapter comes off to the reader and from that make recommendations.

SPECIFICS

"Forgive me, Lord," he said. He parked the truck and went inside.

This is the sentence in Chapter One that hooks the reader, that arouses our curiosity and makes us want to keep reading. What is Reverend Tester up to that he should need the Lord's forgiveness? He's been skillfully drawn as a Bible-thumping evangelist preaching on fornication to a small southern revival congregation.

The thing is, he's like every Bible-thumping southern evangelist we come across, in real life or in novels. (And don't make him physically repulsive, please. Make him handsome but with a pot belly.) You need him, but your readers don't need six pages to get the picture. I'd make this chapter a very brief prologue. You can cut a lot of what's on page 2, can cut way back on Tester's sermon, can tell us much less about his technique, tighten up what comes after the sermon—probably cut the whole chapter from six pages to just over three.

The discovery of Tester's penis in Chapter Two is very well done. (I assume you've done some research and a normal-size penis, assuming its owner were dead, would really only be two inches? Surprised me.) The discovery of his body lets us know where he was murdered.

We meet Cooter in Chapter Three, the DUI case is interesting, and he's informed about the murder victim with a missing member and the member with a missing body. Most readers will want to stay with you at this point.

In Chapter Four the TBI gets involved in the murder case. Why? I thought kidnapping or drugs had to be on the table before they were called in.

The adoption in Chapter Five doesn't seem to have anything to do with the plot, but I think readers will trust you and assume it actually does. And it's intriguing. Something seems off.

I like the little Chapter Six in which Cooter watches his daughter dance and is bursting with love and pride. Give us his dialogue when he thanks her instead of telling us he "thanked her for the gift she had given him."

In Chapter Seven, why hasn't Gray been able to come up with a witness who saw Tester harassing Angel? And why does he just tell Crump Julie Hayes told him Angel "had some kind of conversation with him" when he knows the reverend was groping her, etc.? This is an interesting chapter, but these points need to be dealt with.

Chapter Eight is a winner, though not a surprise to the reader. Cooter handles himself very well, the reader wonders what kind of hell Angel has lived through, and many readers will believe she's innocent and hope Cooter can get her off. You can maybe do a little more with Angel's lack of affect.

In Chapter Nine Angel is touching and convincing. Again, no surprises, but readers now have a real stake in Cooter's winning the case. If she's putting on an act, we've bought it. Again, try to do more with Angel's lack of affect. Have her dialogue be a little off.

I don't know about Chapter Ten. It's mildly entertaining, but you've got readers hooked on your plot, and your inebriated lawyers are just plain silly. Consider cutting the chapter or—better—have the lawyers refer to a case that reveals something reprehensible about the system.

Chapter Eleven is very entertaining. We get a good picture of Cooter's relationship with his wife, and her unrestrained exuberance over the fee he's getting is fun for the reader. About that fee: is \$50,000 high enough for a high-profile, probably death-penalty murder case? Also: wouldn't Caroline ask Cooter what the DA has? And whether or not he thinks his client is guilty? I think it's very important that Cooter believe she's innocent.

What happens to Mary (who we assume is Angel) in Chapter Twelve is horrific, but without medical attention the burns would scar her horribly for life—and Angel is unblemished. You'd better have her find the spoon in the oatmeal immediately and then, when she's sent upstairs, slip out of her room and go to a faucet and turn the cold water tap on to keep herself

from screaming with pain. That way she might avoid horrible scars. (I know she has scars, but if they were terribly disfiguring she wouldn't be suitable for a job in a strip club.)

In Chapter Thirteen, why does the judge say (with Cooter's agreement) that it doesn't often happen for a murder defendant to retain an attorney? I never heard of one not retaining an attorney. This chapter reads well, but it's totally predictable. Can you think of some way to freshen it up, make something a little offbeat happen?

In Chapter Fourteen we learn that first-DUI offenders in Tennessee have to spend two nights in jail, but my brother got one (his BAC was low, admittedly) and only had to spend one night. And while you're giving this information, I wish you'd inform the reader how little you have to have had to drink to qualify as DUI. I think Tennessee may be the toughest state in the country—two or maybe two and a half beers over the course of an hour or so. Anita Broome's appearance in court and story are entertaining, but again we're away from the plot. If you use this incident as a way of showing more sharply how Cooter feels about getting guilty DUI offenders off, it will be fine.

With Chapter Fifteen we're back to the plot, which is good, though the content is predictable. Until we get to Cooter's phone call to Voltiere at the end of the chapter. I had kind of forgotten about the Hayes testimony. But I really think Voltiere should take care of Julie on his own, at least to the point of him getting someone to kill her. And we need interior monologue from him—he shouldn't be a cold-blooded murderer, this should be the first time he's ever done anything remotely like this. We need to know before now how he feels about her; now we need to see him in crisis about to carry out a terrible act because the alternative, to him, is even more terrible.

Chapter Sixteen is surprising. I think Cooter should say he can't quit the case because he cares too much about it, it's too important to him to get his client off, and there's a \$50,000 fee at issue. (In that order, and those should be his priorities.) This look into his psyche is fascinating. But his being in the state he must be in for Caroline to have made the appointment comes out of left field. We should see it building up. And his state of mind shouldn't reach this point yet, because he still believes in Angel's innocence.

Chapter Seventeen reveals the mystery of what has caused Cooter's PTSD and gives us the sexual abuse we were pretty sure was going to show up in Angel's history.

David's an interesting kid, and you make us believe he's really a terrific baseball hitter. When he asks his dad about the case, it feels all wrong for Cooter not to tell him he thinks Angel's innocent. If he and David have any closeness at all, he'd share that conviction with him. I love David's asking him why he does something for a living that he dislikes so much. This chapter should be moved much earlier.

Chapter Eighteen continues Angel's story, entertainingly but predictably. We already know she ran away from her abusers and that Voltiere took her under his wing, so this chapter just fills in the blanks along the lines we'd expect.

Chapter Nineteen isn't what we expect, though after I read the murder scene I felt I should have seen it coming. But why did Voltiere give Angel a knife? You'd better say she picked it up just in case. There's no reason in this scenario for him to give it to her. And Tester can't hit her in the face—the cops would notice the bruise.

The poker game and fight in Chapter Twenty take us away from the plot but are interesting because they illuminate Cooter's character. And the closing line is terrific. Another enemy is indeed the last thing he needs.

I don't think you need Chapter Twenty-One, filled with stereotypes. Even if you kept him mob-connected, the reader already knows that and Voltiere has already given the order to have Julie killed. You don't need to fill in these blanks. As for Angel's "parents," we can find out he had them murdered at the end of the next chapter. She can say, at the end, "Mr. Voltiere told me they're dead. They were killed in a freak automobile crash." The reader will get the picture. Same thing goes for Chapter Twenty-Four.

And I'm not thrilled with Chapter Twenty-Five. As I said, we need to find out about his sister's sexual abuse at the hands of her uncle much earlier.

Chapter Twenty-Six is cynical and interesting, though it doesn't really reveal things we don't already know. I think it would be more interesting if Cooter has been convinced of Angel's innocence up to this point, then starts to wonder during the meeting with Frye. It could bother him a lot that Julie Hayes has gone missing. Other stuff that comes out in the chapter could bother him.

Chapter Twenty-Seven is an interesting, nasty, cynical chapter. And Chapter Twenty-Eight is all of those and more. The legal system is on trial in this novel.

Twenty-Nine is full of good courtroom drama, but it would be a lot better if Martin weren't so inept. Make him odious but sharp, good at his job. That will require Cooter to be really skillful at his. Also, the trial is too detailed, since the reader knows everything that's coming. Use narrative summary to get us through it quickly, saving only the best dialogue from the lawyers and judge.

I'd like Chapter Thirty a lot better if Cooter has a bad taste in his mouth and decides to quit law and look for a baseball team to manage.

Chapter Thirty-One is predictable but chilling nonetheless.

STYLE

A few little pointers:

Reader involvement in a scene is more intense when you keep the point of view steady, not shifting from one character's head to another's. (If you need to shift, do it with a double linespace.) In your final chapter, you start out writing from Angel's point of view—we're in her head. Then, for the next three paragraphs, we're in the soldier's head, learning a little about him and how he's looking forward to his encounter with Angel. We then switch back to Angel's point of view for the rest of the scene. Instead, write the whole scene from her point of view. She can have learned a little about him before he came to her room.

Be religious about using contractions in dialogue, unless a character is prissy or formal. Failure to use them makes dialogue sound a little stiff, as when Cooter says "I have not spoken to her this morning," on page 113. Or when the judge, two pages later, says "I assume you have filed your death notice, General Crump?"

Try to write interior monologue without thinker attributions such as "he thought." You can rewrite the thought into third person, italicize it (don't overuse this method), put the thought into its own paragraph, recast a "he wondered" thought as a question, or simply cut the attribution. Try this last solution first and see if it isn't clear that the line is your character's thought without your telling the reader so. For example, on page 115:

Unbelievable, Cooter thought. With the number of stab wounds. . .

Just cut “Cooter thought.” It’s perfectly clear that “unbelievable” is interior monologue.

Titles like “your honor” and “the general” aren’t capitalized. Neither is “the state.”

Don’t put Tester’s sermon or any other blocks of copy in italics.

RECOMMENDATIONS

You can see I’m suggesting not a revision but a complete rewrite. I do think the result could be a big novel. Send it in to me for a reread with feedback (\$2.00 a page again) and do any fine-tuning I may recommend. Once we’ve got the content nailed down, I’ll do a light line-edit, then you should qualify for our Agent Matchmaking Program. Not a big hurdle if you and I do our jobs right.

In the meantime, I loved working on *Angel Among Us*. It’s great fun to read, and I think you can make it irresistible. E-mail me or call if you have any questions or want to run anything by me, now or while you’re revising.

Yours,

Renni