

Manuscript Evaluation

Author:

[REDACTED]

Work: [REDACTED], novel, mainstream/“senior lit” (author’s tag), 496 pages

Summary

PLOT SUMMARY DELETED AT AUTHOR’S REQUEST

Overall comments

[REDACTED] is an engaging, sweet, sometimes funny novel of geezer love. Both [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] are distinct, likable, entertaining characters, and their difficulties are relatable and sometimes insightful. The writing is clear, easy to read, and remarkably clean.

[REDACTED] is a sentimental novel. By that I mean that it seems aimed primarily at staging events that will quickly generate billows of emotion—it’s a tearjerker. Sentimentalism is chronically out of fashion with critics yet perennially popular with its fans.

But with or without the sentimentality, I think [REDACTED] can be a much better novel. The common thread of its weaknesses—and I’ll examine this from

various angles below—can be summed up as a tendency to pull its punches. It often brings up situations and issues that merit in-depth examination and grueling struggle, but instead goes for a fast emotional payoff and then backs off. I think that you can push your characters and situations much further and really air out some important issues, and still jerk as many tears as you like. The result for readers would be a deeper and more exciting experience whose meaning will linger long after the eyes have dried.

Plot

A lot happens in ██████████—birth and death, love and marriage, a cross-country trip, family feuds and reconciliations. But a plot isn't simply what happens. Most basically, a plot consists of a character's book-spanning struggle toward an objective—to achieve the seemingly impossible or avoid the seemingly inevitable. The Trojan War is over and Odysseus has to get back to Ithaca to save his marriage and estate; Hamlet finds out his uncle murdered his father to usurp the throne and marry his mother, and now has to set things right; a scientist learns a runaway asteroid is headed straight for earth and must figure out how to deflect it. Not all stories need an epic plot set on a world stage, but at its core, almost any good story has this sort of structure.

██████████ doesn't have a strong plot. We could say that the plot is ██████████'s struggle to find happiness with ██████████, but it's not that much of a struggle. The novel starts with promise when ██████████ falls for a woman who will be hard to get and harder to get along with, but once he asks her out, things mostly go

swimmingly. They have their ups and downs, but they pretty much do what they want, have a good time, patch up their quarrels rather quickly, and encounter little opposition in their quest for happiness together. Nor is there any real point of resolution. Despite his bluster, ██████ really doesn't have a leg to stand on. ██████'s death at the end isn't really a defeat in their quest, nor does it come about as a consequence of it; it's simply an inevitable event in the life of any aging couple: one of them dies, and the other soon follows. So the novel often feels more like a cross between a travelogue and a soap opera than a strongly plotted story.

Yet there are many opportunities for more serious opposition and hence struggle—and here's where we get into pulling punches. For example, she falls for him without much effort on his part. His initial sexual anxieties turn out to be unfounded, and despite the wonderfully squeamish curiosity most younger people have about geezer sex, the maiden voyage to bed together doesn't even rate a scene. ██████ doesn't really steal the Lincoln, it's his, and he even has a valid license. ██████ isn't really a gold digger, nor does her criminal record turn out to be valid, and she doesn't gamble his money away. ██████ isn't relentless in his efforts to tie ██████ down; it's more a misunderstanding and a clash between two headstrong men than a real war, and once they confront each other, the conflict quickly dissolves into a puddle of tears. In fact, most of the book's issues get washed away by that same salt water: his suspiciousness, her gambling addiction, her jealousy of ██████ and his divided loyalties, the decades-long estrangement between ██████ and ██████—and ██████, for that matter. Even ██████'s occasional sexual problems always succumb to a good cry.

As a result, their quest is more symbolic than actual: aside from the vicissitudes of old age, there's little doubt that they can actually get to the sea. They have money, a car, plenty of friends, and little opposition. So what we're left with is a sentimental journey, a geriatric joyride punctuated by squabbles. The travelogue, too, seems designed for sentimentalism. Instead of seeking out odd, interesting, and mostly unknown sights, and thereby treating readers to something new, our runaways go to all the iconic tourist locales—Rushmore, Grand Canyon, Lincoln's birthplace, Yellowstone, Las Vegas, etc.—where readers can dive into the expected, easy, readymade emotions rather than find new things to see and feel about this country. If ██████ were really trying to hunt down our elderly Bonnie and Clyde, they would have to stick to the back roads and out-of-the-way marvels of the USA just to avoid the nationwide dragnet. And they'd have bigger problems than her moods. They'd also have a real quest, and the novel would have a gripping plot.

I think the book would be more gripping, more entertaining, and more enlightening with a strong plot, and if the couple's problems, all common for elders, were far more daunting for these two and were explored in depth through their harrowing struggles with them.

Characters

██████ is a terrific character full of plausible contradictions, as are most good characters. He's warmhearted but doesn't readily take to everyone. People see him as a leader, and yet he's quite unsure of himself. He prides himself on his honesty and yet has

secrets and tells lies, which he rationalizes away. He's somewhat stuck in his ways but willing to venture, with trepidation, into new territory.

██████████ is also a great character. She's what is sometimes called, probably sexistly, a difficult woman. She has her moods, but more to the point, her life has been a struggle, she has often had to fight, and she's quick to stand up for herself, usually with an acid tongue for starters. ██████████ can see through all this to the lack of love she has suffered from for most of her life. But she, too, has her secrets—although they're nowhere near as juicy as they could be, and therefore disappointingly anticlimactic.

Characters and plot meet with the protagonist, the hero, because a protagonist drives a plot by relentlessly struggling towards his objective. In ██████████ ██████████, either ██████████ or ██████████ could be the protagonist, or they could both be, but at present, neither really is, because there isn't much of a struggle. Even when the story comes as close as it ever does to a real showdown between our couple and the opposition—I'm talking of course about the conference call at Win's place—██████████ is gagged and Win steps in to do most of the fighting; in other words, our presumptive protagonists, in their crucial test, are benched.

I sometimes saw the author's protective hand over both of these characters, keeping their struggles mild and their secrets and foibles readily forgivable. It's easy for an author to see herself as the benign god or guardian angel of her fictive world. Unfortunately, that's not the author's job. Instead, she should be the devil or demon who must torture and punish her characters and make them struggle far beyond what they think themselves capable of, all for the amusement and edification of her readers.

drive to Yellowstone, and they do so. He goes to fix the car, and gets it fixed. They decide to take a horseback ride, and ██████ feels stiff the next day. ██████ says she has a terrible migraine, ██████ takes her to the hospital for tests, and yep, she has a migraine (the second hospital trip has a wonderfully horrible twist). You paint a vivid portrait of geezer romance and the sorts of problems grandma and grandpa Romeo and Juliet encounter, but because the difficulties are soft-pedaled, it's a rather placid portrait. Scene after scene, chapter after chapter goes by that simply chronicles the predictable progress of a rather sedate journey. If instead, the characters were involved in a continuing and escalating conflict that they had to deal with every step of the way—in other words, if the novel had a strong plot—no scene or chapter would be routine and most would not go as expected, which would make the novel much more compelling for readers.

With any story, readers derive a lot of enjoyment and even epiphanies from reading between the lines—or, to put it in more literary terms, from discerning the subtext. Subtext is anything that is conveyed, suggested, or implied without being put into words. It lurks below the surface. Once you put it into words, it becomes text rather than subtext and is yanked to the surface, thus losing depth. Here and there throughout ██████, what would better remain subtext is turned into text. A few examples, the first three from Ch. 5:

- “As for ██████’s handbag, it must have always been there at her side. But a woman’s purse was like an appendage, an extra arm. And you didn’t keep track of arms. Her soft, purplish calico cloth purse with lots of pockets and scattered with purple, glittery spangles didn’t exactly seem

like something that he'd miss. But what was in that bag? Perhaps the clue as to what made ██████ tick was hidden in her interior as well." I

highlighted the spoiled subtext.

- "...the earlier thought of her pushing him out of the car not very funny now."
- "She was right."
- Near the end of Ch. 6, three italicized paragraphs explain exactly what's going through ██████'s mind. Show, don't tell. Grant readers the intelligence, and give them the chance, to figure this out for themselves.
- One more example: ██████'s advice to Sherman in Ch. 12 has already been suggested by circumstances. She now puts into words what most readers will already have been thinking. If she's going to give him advice, it should be surprising and insightful—i.e., interesting and entertaining—rather than a statement of the obvious.

Don't deprive readers of the pleasure of seeing subtext, and don't talk down to them by treating them like dummies. I will revisit this topic when we get to dialogue.

An important piece of fiction technique, but one that arises only rarely in ██████, is point of view. Point of view (POV) in fiction refers to the character through whose eyes, ears, heart, and mind any particular scene comes to us. A novel can have more than one POV character, but almost all of ██████ comes to us through ██████'s POV—we see what he sees, hear his thoughts, etc. And that's fine. But then in Ch. 53, briefly, we shift to ██████'s POV for her conversation with [Joel](#). ██████ overhears part of it, but not all, for when Savannah and

█ first start talking, █ points to █ “sitting right over there.” This one and only real departure from his POV is jarring and distracting. As well, here and there, the narrative inadvertently slips to another’s POV for a second, as in this example from Ch. 56: “█ looked up and saw █’s face, quite red.” Much has been said about POV, but one piece of fiction technique that will give your ms a more focused and professional feel is that in any one scene, it’s best to stick with just one POV. While it’s often handy for the author to use several POVs in a scene, doing so is less elegant, tends to disorient readers, and will likely bring a frown to agents and acquisition editors. Limiting yourself to only one POV per scene amounts to holding the authorial camera steady.

Dialogue

Dialogue has a double-edged importance in a novel: if well done, it can be the most vivid way to put across your characters and their relationships; if anything less than well done, it casts a pall over them and the whole story. The dialogue in █ is often quite good. It sounds natural and realistic, and the different characters have distinct voices.

In places, the dialogue suffers from a flaw that I brought up earlier in regards to subtext. The main purpose of dialogue is to hint at—imply, suggest, give a glimpse of—interpersonal undercurrents among characters. After all, in real life, we rarely speak what’s on our minds or hearts at the time. Instead, we’re pursuing some agenda—perhaps to impress, amuse, dominate, defuse, seduce, reject, avoid—and using conversation to push it along. When a man tells a woman that the dress she’s wearing

makes her look good—or chubby—he’s not really commenting on fashion. Dialogue in which characters explicitly say what they’d probably only feel or think or beat around the bush about is called *on the nose*, and as well as sounding unnatural as dialogue, it amounts to telling what should be shown. It turns rich and evocative subtext into flat text and talks down to readers. The conversation between ██████ and ██████ at the end of Ch. 6 is one example. In Ch. 17, Warren gets right to criticizing ██████ to ██████ rather than just hinting at his disapproval, which would build suspense. It’s also unrealistic that he’d be on such an explicit tear about her as soon as he meets her. Another example of on-the-nose dialogue:

██████ flinched. “That’s low, ██████.”

“It was supposed to be mean.” She was almost hissing now.

“Look, I wanted to travel with you, not for you or because of you. As for your car? It was, it is your car. Why wouldn’t you want it back? I didn’t like to see you get stepped on. If I didn’t care for you, why would I push you into taking a trip with me in a car that held so many memories of ██████.”

██████’s cheeks now were as scarlet as the string around her neck holding the buckeyes together. His voice remained calm, low. “Why are you bringing up my wife? My dead wife? She’s never, I’ve never…”

██████ whirled away from him. Her arms folded across her chest, her eyes shut tight, her breathing became rapid. “I’ve tried

so hard. She's always there. She's always seated in between us in that car. Usually, just there, in that car. Oh no, you don't talk about her except 'we were there, and here, and I remember.'"

"No one is comparing you two. Besides, I didn't think I was bringing her up in any other way than to reminisce, to talk, to tell you. All I wanted is that you not sneak around behind my back. What else are you hiding?"

She snorted. "I've killed 10 people."

"This is serious, ██████████. No need to be sarcastic."

"I know it's serious." She put her hand up to her forehead and held it there. "That's why I'm being sarcastic. Look, I've tried to tone things down, tone me down, try to get along..."

"I never asked you to do that, ██████████. I've loved you in spite of all that. But I didn't think you'd lie to me. Now I'm concerned that you have more secrets, far deeper problems, that you and I have more problems I'm not sure I want to handle right now. I really don't understand it. I don't understand you. And I guess, then, I don't understand us. My life has had its ups and downs, but God, at least I could trust ██████████. No surprises."

"All that?" She had clutched onto that. "Remember,"

██████████ turned away from him, "I'm not a saint. I'm not ██████████"

In writing dialogue, first you have to figure out what the characters think, feel, and want, and then you have to figure out what they'd actually say.

There are also problems with dialogue mechanics—how you couch the spoken words within the text, “she said” and so forth—which can be cleared up with a few tips to give the dialogue a more professional look.

Style

You write very well. The prose is fluid, clear, and graceful. There is an extremely sparse sparkling of little goofs in spelling (you're/your confusion, for one), punctuation, and the like, which you'll be able to self-edit out.

I've mentioned a few stylistic problems above—dialogue mechanics, explaining what should remain as subtext, on-the-nose dialogue, POV slips, and so forth. Another you want to weed out is repetition. On a small scale, we have, in Ch. 1, “...after years of sitting flat on his fanny at the bank,” and a few pages later in Ch. 2, “...most of the time you are flat on your fanny.” We're told how ██████ lost his ██████, and then, in Ch. 8, we get a flashback that repeats the information. But there is also large-scale repetition. ██████ and ██████ often have arguments they've had before. True, in life this happens all the time, but in a novel, to keep readers involved and interested, you have to keep things changing and developing. The football rivalry gets rehashed several times. ██████ twice gives ██████ the “it's an adventure” lecture about eating different food in odd restaurants. The final four chapters fondle his grief over and over again in different ways. Keep in mind that you must keep readers constantly engaged, interested, and entertained, and readers tend to be highly allergic to repetition.

The voice is, well, almost motherly. The author is clearly fond of the characters, savors their victories and anguishes over their pain, and sees the world as an essentially benign place aside from that one pesky detail, death. It's a comforting and reassuring voice. But while most readers will appreciate that, they also want an author who is willing to be a hardnosed mother when necessary and demand that her characters face hardship, take on daunting challenges, and suffer the consequences when they screw up—a mother who is able to turn her characters loose into the harsh wilds of a novel with a “bye-bye, baby bird.”

Genre Considerations

“Senior lit,” huh? I've also called it geezer lit. And to be blunt, I don't know how much of an audience it has. Do non-seniors want to read about old people? Do even old people want to, or are younger characters more fun? I doubt that senior lit will sell solely on the basis that it's about old people. On the other hand, a well-crafted and well-written novel with an interesting premise can sell whether or not it's about seniors.

I think you have a good premise with [REDACTED]: two oldsters who fall in love and hit the road in search of happiness despite strong opposition from their families, their infirmities, their histories, their diehard habits and preferences, the assortment of odd characters they meet along the way, and their own demons. But to make this a compelling novel of whatever genre, I also think you need to push this premise much further, beyond a portrait of what such a trip would probably be like for two ordinary people in real life, and explore the dark byways such a quest could potentially lead them into.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Our first step, though, would be to go over any questions you may have about this evaluation. Please email me whenever you're ready. For any questions about the options I've presented, please contact Managing Editor, Ross Browne, at rsb@editorialdepartment.com or 520 546-9992.

I very much enjoyed reading [REDACTED]. Whatever you decide to do, good luck with your writing.

Peter Gelfan