

K.L. Going – Sample Critique

Note: This is a sample critique I did for Vermont College. It will give you a good idea of my style, however, this is not a typical critique since it focuses on two diverse shorter works (a partial and a picture book) rather than a full-length novel.

To: Fictional Author
From: KL Going
RE: *Fictional Story*
Date: today

What a pleasure to receive your work. I was impressed with the quality of your writing. CHARACTER has a wonderful narrative voice and your setting is rich with evocative details. It was a treat to see this story unfold. CHARACTER's story is well worth telling. There are so many exciting possibilities for developing the text, and I hope you'll have fun trying on some different styles to see what works best. I found myself relating to your enjoyment of the old fashioned narrator who talks directly to the reader. I'm a fan of that style as well. I've always loved to imagine I'm curled up beside someone who is telling me the story of their life. Great job!

Of course, I do have some suggestions for improvement. You've obviously put in a lot of hard work, and my comments reflect this. I've written less on the pages themselves than I usually do because your work is already quite strong. Hopefully as we go through the strengths and weaknesses of your work, you'll find some thoughts and new ideas that can help make your writing irresistible to agents and editors. I'd love to see FICTIONAL TITLE find its way to the bookshelf.

Let's begin this critique by looking at dialogue. So many writers overlook opportunities for dialogue, but you've included some great lines that revealed character and set the tone of the story. I loved the way you included the lines of enunciation – "OBSCURED" – because they showed CHARACTER #1's enthusiasm for and dedication to acting, while also giving the reader insight into how her obsession might be trying at times for her mother. CHARACTER #1's dialogue also helped establish her personality. I felt like I'd be able to pinpoint her as the speaker even if you didn't identify who was talking. And I loved the line, "OBSCURED FOR PRIVACY." Laugh out loud funny!

In addition to superb dialogue, your characters, for the most part, are coming across well. CHARACTER #1 is easy to like and CHARACTER #2 is very funny. CHARACTER #3 offers a nice counterpoint to her sister's flamboyance while remaining real and intriguing in her own right. All of the girls are relatable and interesting, and I found myself wanting to read more about them. The characters that seemed weaker were LIST OBSCURED. Her mother is coming across as a bit of a cliché, and I wonder if there's something you could add that might make her more unique. I always love when a writer hints at the depth of their secondary characters. Even if we don't know them as well as we know the main characters, we should still see shades of their inner life. This is

especially true for adults in YA novels. Writing for teens focuses more on young people, but the best novels offer layers of character development for the adults as well – they just do it in subtle ways. Might there be a character trait that would show the mom’s personality? Maybe she has a penchant for cooking exotic recipes and sighing loudly? Or there might be a stray animal she either feeds or turns away, depending on whether you want to hint at firmness or kindness lurking beneath the surface? Try to think of something that could shed light on who she is as a person rather than simply portraying how she relates to CHARACTER #1 as a mother.

Often it’s these tiny choices that can make a character jump off the page. This applies to CHARACTER #1’s father as well. I loved the idea of him whistling when he’s in a good mood. That’s a great start! But I still needed more for him to become real. I had a hard time getting a handle on the dad. In the beginning you said he was traveling around the country with OBSCURED, and that gave me the impression of a vagabond, perhaps an absentee father. But then we find out he’s actually very well employed as OBSCURED, and that gives the image of a respectable family man who was doing something charitable to help out OBSCURED. I’m sure the truth is somewhere in between, but you can probably see where the contrasting images might be confusing for readers who don’t know the context. I’d suggest telling us more about OBSCURED and how the dad got involved. You’d only need a line or two to make this much clearer. You might also add more references to his having just returned to his old job to remind the reader of the timeline. Also, could you give us a sense of how his being away might have affected family dynamics? It wasn’t clear if he has any real say in the decision making or not. Are he and CHARACTER #1’s mother at odds? In love? How old is the father? (Normally this wouldn’t be something that needed clarifying, but it might be confusing to young readers because the father’s relatives are so close in age to CHARACTER #1.)

Speaking of setting up details right from the start, I liked your opening line and the reference to OBSCURED, but I wondered if you might be able to make that first paragraph more active. If you show CHARACTER #1 interacting with the book, then the quote from OBSCURED could be something she’s actively reading – she might even say it out loud -- rather than being a broad generalized quote. By shifting some sentences around you can also avoid the awkward phrase “I had my own copy” (it seems like it should be “have” even though “had” is also correct) and the uncomfortable break between that sentence and the start of the following paragraph. This might seem picky, but opening paragraphs are so important and it’s worth the extra effort to get them right. You might also consider using the term OBSCURED earlier in the text to make the time period crystal clear. You’ve got all the right details (like OBSUCRED EXAMPLES) that would allow a savvy reader to figure it out immediately, but my personal preference is not to risk confusion.

Other than mentioning the time period earlier, I thought your portrayal of the setting – and your choice of setting – was superb. I am a huge fan of historical fiction, and from what I’ve been hearing lately, it seems that this genre is making a comeback in the marketplace. OBSCURED is a rich milieu within which to place your story. There’s great fun in the catch phrases and the radio programs and ads that you quote, and yet

there's also the potential for much struggle, and that's a winning combination in a novel. I'm not sure how much you intend to use OBSCURED as the story progresses, but if he's going to have a significant part to play than don't hesitate to show the reader how much of a heartthrob he is. Was he the Robert Pattinson of the time? What did he look like? What kind of voice does OBSCURED have? Let yourself have fun with CHARACTER #1s crush and your reader will delve in right along with her.

As I said before, I can't wait to read the next installment of this novel and see where you decide to take the story. My best advice as you continue to develop the storyline: Don't forget the trouble!

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Now let's turn our attention to TITLE. You've found a powerful story here, and with some work I think this will be a text that editors will be interested in adding to their lists. Non-fiction generally sells well, and more important, this story has a lot of heart and a strong message. CHARACTER is a great role model for young children and her story is sure to capture the imagination of anyone who reads it.

The question for you, as the author, is how best to arrange the text to take this picture book from good to great. Right now you have a rather straight retelling of events with a repeating poetic passage interspersed, but the poetic effect was not clear enough to stand out in the way that I'm sure you intended. I felt like the story was very interesting, but also a little flat. You have all the right elements – a great character, an interesting time in history, inspiring events – but now they need to be refined.

You have many options for revision and I'll outline a couple, but before we look at each one, I'll say from the start that I think you should try out several different styles before making your decision. I realize it's a lot of work, but there's no substitute for putting pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard!) and actually seeing the results of a creative decision. With a picture book you have the luxury of shorter length to allow you to draft out the entire story in several different forms. You might be surprised by the results and even if you ultimately come back to your original choice of narration, you'll probably find a gem in the revision process that can help bring this story to life.

The first option I'd suggest is creating a much more poetic retelling of events. There's real beauty in the phrase "OBSCURED" and I'd love to see you explore that. Right now, there's not a lot that's sensory about this text, but if you opt for a more poetic form you could work in some great details of CHARACTER actually working with OBSCURED – FURTHER EXAMPLES – that could make this story more evocative. You'd need to cut down on the amount of text considerably, but this is always good in the picture book form.

One of the difficulties I found with the text in its current incarnation was how much information you are attempting to pass along to the reader. A whole lifetime is discussed in just a few pages, so it's natural that the impact of each stage in CHARACTER's life would be lessened. If you choose a poetic retelling, you could devote one stanza to each significant time period, which would make the information more manageable for young children while the poetry would bring it to life in a way that doesn't get bogged down trying to fit in all the facts. You could still tell CHARACTER's entire life story, but you'd be more selective with how you tell it, so instead of a long paragraph (or several paragraphs) of information, you'd choose only the strongest words to create a poetic snapshot of CHARACTER at each age.

Another option that would solve the same problem would be to limit your storytelling to only one time period in CHARACTER's life and then make her ultimate fate a surprise ending. For example, you might choose to focus on CHARACTER's childhood since this is most relatable to children and it's also the time of her greatest struggles. By focusing your lens, you could make her life as OBSCURED come alive for your readers. The "OBSCURED" phrase could be repeated as a sign of CHARACTER's determination just as you have it now, but the impact would be greater if the events she's struggling against seem more real. This approach would sacrifice a lot of information about her later life, but the end result would offer a huge contrast between her humble beginnings and her ultimate fate, and that would make a big impression.

Finally, you could also try working backwards. One difficulty with the text now is that CHARACTER doesn't come across as a real and important figure – you're depending on your reader already knowing who she is in order for CHARACTER's involvement to have meaning. In fact, this was a difficulty throughout the book. You're making a lot of assumptions that your readers will know about OBSCURED, but you need to reveal these events rather than depending on your reader's prior knowledge. What if you were to begin the story with OBSCURED? This approach would allow us to hear CHARACTER's story in her own words, and instead of the narration seeming distant, it might seem warmer – a life story told in a unique colloquial manner. Again, there'd be no need to eliminate your beautiful catch phrase "OBSCURED" because you could simply make it into something CHARACTER repeats as she tells her own tale.

I'm sure there are other possibilities for revision, and I encourage you to brainstorm some ideas on your own. I'm assuming that you're not interested in making this the kind of factual non-fiction book that, say, Susan Campell Bartoletti writes. I might be wrong about that, and if I am, I strongly suggest you study her work. My assumption is based on the length of your text and the amount of detail you've included. Although you have a lot of information about CHARACTER's life, you'd need many more sources to make this a book that operated without the storytelling element. Let me know if you're interested in this approach and we can discuss it further, otherwise, have fun trying your hand at a range of narrations.

Also, if this isn't part of your writing routine, I recommend always conducting an Internet search of whatever topic you're writing about (this applies to fiction as well) to

see what's already on the market. Even books written for adults can offer you new ideas, and when similar books for children exist you'll want to make sure your book is significantly different. If no similar books are out there, a market search is still a helpful way to find books that relate in a tangential manner. For example, I'd recommend you read other picture books that deal with the topic of OBSCURED since this is a tricky subject for this market. A quick Amazon search in the children's book category will reveal several good books. Don't forget to ask for recommendations from your local librarian as well. I'm certain this is already part of your writing process, but a friendly reminder never hurts!

One last recommendation . . . be sure to read as many picture book biographies as you can to study the different approaches the authors have taken to telling a life story. I'd recommend *To Go Singing Through the World: The Childhood of Pablo Neruda* by Deborah Kogan Ray, *Harvesting Hope: The Story of Cesar Chavez* by Kathleen Krull, *Martin's Big Words: The Life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* by Doreen Rappaport, and *Moses: When Harriet Tubman Led Her People to Freedom* by Carole Boston Weatherford. As you read, pay special attention to which information the authors selected to tell and how they chose to convey it to children. What do they leave out? How do they make a complex life understandable to young readers? Is there a repeating element and if so how does the author employ the device?

I hope you'll have fun developing this book. You've got a wonderful story here, and you can learn a lot from trying out different ways to tell this tale. If you're like most writers, you may find it hard to give yourself permission to take the time necessary to experiment, but you've already made the commitment to your craft, so relax and don't be afraid to go outside your comfort zone and try your hand at something new. I suspect you'll be pleasantly surprised by the results.

Before I sign off, let me say once again what a pleasure it was to read your material. I hope you're enjoying the time you spend writing – your enthusiasm will show through in the end result. You've already accomplished a lot, and I am truly excited to see what you send next. Don't hesitate to call or e-mail if you have questions about this letter or need clarification on any of my comments. And remember to give yourself some breathers as you revise. Revision is hard work. It's an emotional journey as well as a mental one, so take your time and remind yourself often that you're doing a great job (because you are!). Looking forward to hearing from you again soon.