

Mind and Language: Zoe Gilbert's Blog

Thursday 12th April 2012

A first meeting with my mentor

Today I experienced my first 'mentoring' session with a professional writer, so I thought it might be useful to share the experience, particularly for those considering paying for this kind of service. I was lucky; I won a mentoring package from Adventures in Fiction on the strength of the first page of my novel, so I had nothing to lose in taking this up. Though considering that first page is probably the strongest in the novel, I was apprehensive about what they'd make of the rest of it.

Firstly, to Adventures in Fiction's credit, they matched me very well with a mentor – the writer in question is a successful novelist writing for young adults, using themes and age groups that appear in my manuscript too. She is also an experienced creative writing tutor, and it showed. She had read my novel three times before meeting me, and prepared an agenda of the key areas to think about. Whilst this initial session was meant to be an overview, giving me broad questions to think about before making any nitty gritty changes to the text, my mentor went into great detail on premise, plot, characterisation, target audience and genre. I'm going to write a bit about her insights into each of these, to give my own overview of what you might expect from mentoring.

Genre and target age group

Being clear on these things matters a lot to an agent, and a publisher. They also set the expectations of a reader. With a title like mine – *The Tarney Scalp* – and an opening chapter in which the protagonist sees what appears to be a mermaid scalp, there is a strong 'fantasy' message going on. But the plot that ensues is based very much on real people in the real world, with no actual magic and certainly no actual mermaids. I had never been clear on a target age group, aiming only to make the book accessible having found myself writing quite accidentally about a young teenage boy. There is a big difference between the categories that (unfortunately) mark out the young fiction territory. What is deemed suitable for 9-12 year olds, in terms of themes and plot, is completely different from what is marketed to 13-15 year olds. The younger group are considerably less cynical, and thus expect less cynicism from characters. So, there may be a problem with a protagonist who begins by entertaining the possibility of a scalped mermaid, but goes on to become embroiled in a plot to foil violent drug smugglers.

Central Premise

Here we discussed core questions about the protagonist. What is his 'problem' at the start of the novel and how is it resolved? What is the crisis in his life at which point we begin to follow him? How is he changed by the end, and what has brought that change about? In my case, what exactly is that mermaid scalp doing to help him along on his journey? If it is pivotal, we need to know why. If not, is it a red herring, as opposed to another type of sea detritus?

Character and characterisation

This part was much easier to think about now I have some distance between myself and the novel. The idea of ditching any characters would have been hard to swallow had I only finished the manuscript last week. However, I could see that some characters were more necessary than others, and in places there might be two where one would do. My mentor asked me to think about what each character is for, whether they are absolutely necessary to creating or resolving problems in the novel. I'm looking forward to doing this, as well as writing two-page character descriptions for each one and rounding them out. While I like to show rather than tell, I have laid high expectations on my readers around figuring out what is happening in my protagonist's head, where I could give a little more (but not too much) away.

Plot

We were running out of time at this point, but a key message was that, in an age of multi-media distractions, if you are marketing a book specifically for a young audience then it better be a bit of a page turner. In my case, at the climax of the story, the main characters are watching a disaster take place rather than being right in it – albeit a disaster of their own making. This is one of several moments where passivity creeps in, and where I have not made the most of the drama of a situation. So, I'll be re-reading with an eye to upping the genuine jeopardy.

In conclusion, the most satisfying part of this mentoring session was having the doubts I carried in my own head expressed clearly and constructively by someone else. I would not have been able to bring these all to the surface myself, but over and over I had that 'Yes, I thought that!' feeling. The more this happened the more I trusted my mentor, which made me feel I should also think about her suggestions that I didn't necessarily agree with. On the other hand, I can see that, in order to make my novel into a genuinely marketable book specifically for young adult readers,

might require making it into another novel altogether. Now that my writing is altogether better than it was when I wrote *The Tarney Scalp*, it's a big commitment to do this. For now, I'm going to do the exercises suggested by my mentor and learn as much as I can from the process, whether or not I go ahead with a full re-write in the end.

Wednesday 30th May 2012

Mentoring Part 2

The key message that a session of mentoring had revealed to me, I felt, was that I had barked up the wrong tree by trying to label my first novel as 'young adult,' and letting this influence the content and style as I wrote. In sum, my novel seemed to sit so far away from publishers' expectations of what a young adult book should be like, that I faced a rewrite that would be a different book.

In the second session, I admitted as much to my mentor. But despite this negative start, we had an extremely productive hour together. I outlined the plot revisions that I had sketched out between our meetings, that would make the story stronger even if I couldn't face a stylistic overhaul. That set the creative juices flowing on both sides, and my mentor helped me to find ways of solving other problems that would support this plot without making compromises I was uncomfortable with.

I'll give two examples, really to show how engaged my mentor was with me and my novel, and how much input she was able to give in such a short time.

Realism

I had written about teenagers, in the modern world, but had not given them mobile phones or computers even though a late plot twist depended on smugglers using mobiles. This was because I personally find people texting and emailing in novels dull and somehow cringey, even though we all do it in real life, especially if it is not necessary for the plot. My mentor suggested that, given I wanted my main character to feel isolated anyway, and he already lives in a small town somewhere a lot like the Isle of Man, I could move his family home out of the town into the countryside, where mobile signal is difficult to get at all, and perhaps the broadband isn't reliable either. This would create frustration (good) and get in the way of joining in with his friends' activities (good)

Character

I also expressed my worry that the protagonist, a fourteen year old boy, does not really have a 'thing.' By that I mean something that he feels gives him identity, or defines him both to himself and the reader. He has no passion (a sport, a skill, a plan for the future), and this troubles him. I wanted the change he undergoes as a character to include, if not the discovery of a 'thing,' at least the possibility of one. This seemed to me to be something that mattered at that age, but by attempting realism by making my character lack a defining 'thing,' it made him harder to access for the reader. My mentor pointed out that, given he already spends time alone roaming the landscape around his home, it would make sense if he had acquired, without really noticing, an in depth knowledge of the coast – its caves and secret paths, features that are not on the map. In a novel that involves drug smugglers using the coast, and whom the protagonist is attempting to thwart, this would be a genuinely useful device. It is also exactly the sort of skill/knowledge that a person doesn't notice they have, or thinks nothing of, until someone else is impressed and points it out to them. His knowledge could more emphatically save his friends and the day at the novel's climax, as well as developing the character's sense of himself.

Many other ideas came out of this session, and after much brainstorming and plotting I really am considering a rewrite. This is positive but scary, mainly because of the time it might take. For anyone considering shelling out on a mentoring package, though, I'd say that if you're prepared to put in a lot of work, and if you really want to improve what you've written, it would be a worthwhile investment.

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