adventures in fiction
mentoring and manuscript appraisal

Manuscript Assessment: Example

This assessment has been redacted to protect the details of the author and to respect their intellectual property. All identifying details have therefore been removed.

STAGE 1 **full appraisal**
[redacted]

[redacted]

About this Appraisal

The aim of this report is to give you an insight into what is required of a professional novelist. It sets out to contextualise your work within the framework of current publishing standards, to outline the issues and to supply some of the key tools you will need as you move forward in your development as a writer.

It is worth taking your time over each section, perhaps making comparisons with novels you are already familiar with, to see how the author has tackled the issue raised. You may also find that the report throws up more questions than it answers. Again, it is worth taking your time over this before reaching your own conclusion.

Inevitably, the report focuses on those elements within your novel that aren't working, rather than those that are. Try to use the tools offered here to pull out the full potential of your manuscript and transform it into the striking and memorable novel you are obviously aiming for.

Introduction

This is a mystery thriller about [redacted] he combination of what might be seen as a contemporary issue, [redacted] with all the classic tropes of a gothic novel makes this immediately appealing. (Of course, the hapless heroine is a classic of the genre—*The Woman in White* could be said to be about [redacted] for example.)

You clearly have a good grounding in gothic or mystery fiction and a strong sense of where your novel might fit in terms of publishing. (This is a commercial rather than a literary take on the genre.) The title and the concept have immediacy and resonance and plot contains plenty of twists and turns and startling moments of revelation.

Having said that, you have presented yourself with a major challenge in terms of how you develop the narrative.

The Current Synopsis

As an introduction to the manuscript, the synopsis reads well. It has a good shape with a satisfying Hitchcockesque ending. There is a danger, however, that the reference to [redacted]

For this reason it would be a good idea to refine the reference [redacted] by making a clear distinction between [redacted]

Current Stage of Development

You have successfully completed a first draft of your manuscript. You have sketched out the plot and the main characters. It is worth taking a moment to congratulate yourself on this before we proceed to the next stage, which is to move towards full development of the unfolding narrative. One of the ways to do this is via background work away from the manuscript.

Antonia

Antonia is a promising central character. She has escaped [redacted] is constrained by the mores of the times. Though it is not stated, she must have grown up in London during the war and may have

[redacted] This is all fruitful territory.

At present though, she is a little ill defined in terms of background and class. Antonia is quite a middle class name. Is she middle class or working class? Where did she grow up in London? What age was she when she left school? What did her father do? (He isn't mentioned.) Later in the narrative there is a mention that [redacted] Did they move away from where she was from? Where are these friends and family now? Does she have no-one? No one to write to, for example? Brothers? Sisters?

How old is she? [redacted] -Did she have any hobbies? What does she take pride in? What work did [redacted] -do after the war? Before? Has she taken her wedding ring off?

On page 102, there is a first mention of Antonia's past when she references her mother and knitting. You can afford to allow a few more glimpses like this, a few more grounding details. She mentions a few times that she is not religious. This would be very radical for 1956, though she does not seem radical.

The Plot

Generally speaking, the unfolding plotline is effective, with plenty of action and surprises along the way. The developing tension is good—the landlady's remarks, the taxi driver refusing to go up to the house, Antonia arriving and nobody answering the door. The scene on page 14, for example, where Selwyn stops at the end of the road rather than taking her all the way up to the house is a good precursor to what is to come and sets an ominous tone. There is scope here to draw this scene out further in terms of dialogue.

The central plot line—[redacted]—is strong. It is also worth thinking about a sub plot. There are a number of possibilities here.

The challenge comes in the denouement, with how the various plot elements are resolved. (More on this later.)

The Final Twist

The final revelation that [redacted] -is chilling and problematic in equal measure.

All the way through the manuscript I was noting inconsistencies and the lack of concrete detail. Then when the denouement came I realised the reason for the omissions.

This is a major stumbling block. The reader needs the grounding detail to fully engage with and believe in the story. You can withhold information but this needs to be skilfully done. (It shouldn't be apparent.)

If you are certain that this twist is crucial, you will need to find a way to include enough detail to make the narrative convincing. Not an easy challenge! This is something we can discuss.

By page 106, I was making a note that you need to decide whether this is a psychological thriller [redacted] or a mystery thriller [redacted]

The House

The novel would benefit from more description throughout. How old is the house? When was it built? [redacted] Perhaps it is older. (It may depend on when the family first lived there [redacted]

Though Antonia may not know dates or recognise styles of architecture, she would be able to set out her first strong impression of the house. Later, she might find out more, when she goes to the library, for example.

The layout of the house is also a little confusing. It might be worth drawing out a plan. [redacted]

The Supernatural

At present, there are a number of ghosts or apparitions. The couple on the stairs— [redacted] Generally speaking, ghosts are best handled with a light touch. You can unnerve the reader with suggestions and implications, with what is not said. Often, subtle forms of suspense are more effective. The discovery of the dripping water on page 186 has

more impact, for example, than the more literal appearances of [redacted]

The first apparition on page 18 feels a little uncertain. I was not sure how to read it. There are a number of reasons for this. The figures are not described in any detail. Are they contemporary figures or historic? If you have a look at *The Lady in Black,* the first sighting of the lady is tangible. She is 'real.' He sees her. The narrator describes her slightly old fashioned clothes in some detail. Enough to enable the reader to picture them too.

What do you want the reader to take from this scene? Did Antonia see a contemporary couple [redacted]

Part of the reason it is slightly uneasy because if Antonia thought there were people there she would have heard them but she doesn't. Yet mid scene, she hears a precise snap.

One way to handle this scene would be to frame it in a more formal style. If it was written in a more detached way, cutting 'she saw' for example, it might give the scene more immediacy.

As she turned the corner, she came upon the most unexpected scene.
As she turned the corner, a most unexpected scene played out before her eyes.

It is worth studying how other authors handle this type of transition. More importantly, you need to decide whether what Antonia sees is 'real' or not.

When [redacted] appears, I would recommend you describe him in more detail too. Presumably he is wearing [redacted] Antonia would have time to gain a fuller impression when she looks at the portrait in the dining room.

As a general rule, I would suggest you cut references to *imagination, real, apparition, ghost,* etc. (e.g. p.81/p.93.) It is too self referential. There is no need to keep calling attention to the conceit you are aiming for.

When we pick up a mystery thriller, we understand we are entering a particular type of world. Be sparing in your use of words like *terrified, horror* etc. They tend to have a flattening effect. Instead aim to terrify and horrify the reader by allowing them to imagine their way into the scenes themselves.

One aspect of this first spectacle on the stairs that works well is the aftermath. Antonia thinks she is imagining things because of her experience [redacted] She doubts what is in front of her eyes. This is very good characterisation. (It may be worth considering writing her thoughts in the third person, rather than the first.)

Supernatural Paraphernalia

I would recommend that you avoid the too literal aspects of supernatural paraphernalia, in particular, [redacted] The power of suggestion is always going to be more effective. Just the idea of items of Antonia's going missing and then the final revelation when she finds them, along with a lock of her hair, in [redacted]-room might be be chilling enough.

I would recommend reading *The Loney* by Andrew Michael Hurley for a powerful and resonant suggestion of witchcraft that builds up in subtle ways that are deeply unnerving.

Historical Fiction

The novel is set in 1956 which makes it a historic novel. I would recommend that you do more research into the period in terms of mores, attitudes etc.. (Often reading novels set at the same time can be very useful.)

Two novels that are good on period atmosphere. *The Little Stranger.* Sarah Waters. (Set in 1945) and *The Outsider* by Sadie Jones. (Set in 1957.)

The attitude of people to a woman who [redacted] rings true but too often, Antonia's attitude seems contemporary, both in her thoughts, her phrasing and her attitude towards [redacted]

Time Frame

What time of year does the novel open in? When does it close? What time frame does it cover. Knowing this will help map out the passing of time.

Grounding Detail

You have a good solid first draft here. The plot, location and characters are in place. The next step is to develop the manuscript—to really bring

this world to life. The way to do this is with grounding detail, with descriptions of the house and characters.

The lack of detail from the beginning does rather call the plausibility of the narrative into question. (Of course, by the end, I understood why so much key information was withheld. Nonetheless, you need to include enough detail to make the narrative convincing and compelling.)

If this was simply a story about a young woman who is going to be a [redacted] it would included the following detail.

Her job title
A job description.

[redacted] This play on words doesn't entirely work.

At the beginning it seems odd that she doesn't behave like [redacted] which is what she is. Later she protests, that she is not [redacted] -All of this made me doubt the veracity of the narrative and kept me from fully engaging.

Logically, Antonia would refer to Constance [redacted] We, the reader, need to believe in this story to keep reading.

Logically, there would be a description of duties, of how and when Antonia will [redacted]

Questions

How old is the house?
[redacted]
If the family [redacted]
What outcome were they aiming for?

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

Dialogue

The manuscript would benefit from more dialogue throughout with more sense of Antonia's voice and way of speaking. On page 10, for example, wouldn't she ask for more information about [redacted]

We need more of a sense of the time period and way of speaking. There are too many, *ers* and *ums* and unfinished sentences. I would cut all of this.

It may take a little time to capture Antonia's voice. Read more fiction of the period, watch a few films, write a few pages in her voice until you get a stronger sense of how she expresses herself.

Too often, she sounds contemporary. On page 31, for example, she is [redacted]

On page 38, she refers to wild garlic, rather than [redacted]

Too often, contemporary phrasing slips in. *Freaked out. wrap her head around.*

Page 43. The dialogue lacks the formality one might expect. She is often blunt and direct. [redacted] Wouldn't she be more deferential? Hesitant. *May I ask you a question?* For example. [redacted]

The First Fifty pages

The purpose of the first fifty pages is to set up the narrative by setting the scene, introducing the main characters and establishing the opening plot line. These pages need to be convincing enough for the reader to suspend disbelief and engage with the world you are setting out. It is not a good idea to have too many unanswered questions as these call into question the veracity of the narrative.

Page 27. Is the house dirty or clean? Is there dust? [redacted] Is there food in the larder? How does it get to the house if no-one delivers? (Generally speaking, many grounding details and plot points need to come earlier than currently.)

Page 28. Usually in the 1950's the telephone who be in the hallway?

Assuming for a moment, that we are to believe [redacted] logically when Antonia arrives, they would have tea, [redacted] (All these details occurred to me before I discovered the final plot twist.)

31. Wouldn't Antonia ask for permission to look round, or be offered it?
33. They still haven't eaten? What does [redacted] like to eat? What is the routine? [redacted]
34. What time is it? Antonia assumes she will eat with [redacted] Lighting the fires, for example.
38. She mentions here chores for the day. What are they? Washing clothes, ironing, cleaning.

How did Antonia get this job?

A key element that does work well is Constance's use of Antonia's experience [redacted] to undermine her. The psychological aspect of the narrative is compelling and effective.

[redacted]

One of the first points worth developing is Antonia's [redacted] This could serve as a strong motif and is worth describing in graphic detail. Is her eye half closed? Swollen? Throbbing? What shade of black is it? What colour are her own eyes? Is it a fresh bruise from the day before?

At present, the description is rather vague. [redacted]

As the narrative progresses, Antonia often forgets about it. This seems unlikely, especially in the 1950's. She is also a young woman so would be self-conscious of her appearance. Wouldn't she examine it every day?

Later she refers to it as an unsightly bruise. Again this is a bit vague.

Is her eye affected? Is it bloodshot, for example? [redacted] -This will be a good way of marking time in the early stages of the narrative.

A good strong and evolving description of [redacted] -would sharpen the focus at the beginning of the narrative.

The Central Motif

I would recommend you write a detailed description of [redacted]

[redacted]

The Mistress-Servant Relationship

Whether or not [redacted] -the class relationship between the two women is key. (And full of potential.) At present, this is undeveloped and the lack of a master-servant dynamic adds to the sense of unreality. The class dynamic is quite a powerful angle and worth pulling out further. (Think of the film *The Servant.)*

p.47 Little sense of the master-servant relationship.
p.52 Master-servant dynamic not reflected in the dialogue.
p.56 Her questioning [redacted] -is too bald and direct.
p.57 She joins [redacted] She is not a guest, is she? Doesn't she have work to do? Dusting, brushing floors, making beds, washing clothes? Houses don't clean themselves!
p.78 When Antonia gets angry it seems out of character and time. She is downtrodden and subservient yet her rage feels contemporary.
p.82 How much does she get paid? Is it weekly? Does [redacted] -give her the money or leave it somewhere for her?
p.94. [redacted] -questions the menu— porridge—but she has never set out her preferences. [redacted]
p.188 [redacted] This is confusing as from a reader's point of view this is exactly what she is. The use of the the word [redacted] isn't entirely convincing.

The Final Twist

The danger with this final twist is—what does it leave the reader with? [redacted]

Ideally, we need to see some character development, a sense of something about Antonia's situation that lingers in the readers imagination.

If on the other hand, we are to understand that [redacted], this throws up a new set of questions.

[redacted]

[redacted]

There is an element of Miss Haversham to the story. (Always evocative!) Is the narrative more effective with [redacted]

Plot Points

Almost all the plot points could happen earlier.

p.50 There is a child's playroom. This is potentially rather magical and worth elaborating on. [redacted]

Isn't Antonia curious about where [redacted] (These thoughts could come earlier.)

p.51. First mention of food. Is there plenty? Has [redacted] prepared a menu? Where does the food come from?

p.53 Surely [redacted] What is the family history?

p.57 Finally it is market day and Antonia can go into town with Jim. Once you have set out the time frame for the novel, you can build much more of a sense of time passing.

p.81 The first mention of [redacted]

p.94 [redacted]

p.106. Tangible actions work well. Antonia is convinced that someone is hiding in the house. This could be followed through further. (She seems to forget about this later on.)

p.109 [redacted]

p.107 Antonia decides to find the source [redacted] (Could have occurred earlier.)

p.118 She starts to talk about herself. This is effective and could be built upon.

p.119 [redacted]

Ch.15 Strong dramatic scene where she finds a gate in the woods but is interrupted by Jim, [redacted] Her lack of trust is effective and isolates her further.

p.126 Another strong dramatic scene where she finds the grave in the middle of the storm. [redacted]

p.141. [redacted] (Again, could come earlier.)

p.144 Surely Antonia would have thought about [redacted] before? And indeed, the family in general?

What happened to [redacted] She finds the knitting and then the pen. This element could be drawn out further.

p.149. She seems to have forgotten her idea that someone is hiding in the house?

p.157. She goes to [redacted] with Jim. What happened to the weekly shop? How much time has passed? Does [redacted] have no visitors? Not even the doctor or a solicitor? Finally Jim tells her that she can find out about the family at the library [redacted] (Could come earlier.)

p.188. Antonia seems to have forgotten that she walked in the flour herself? (This thread could be expanded upon.)

p. 217. The inn keeper tells her about previous [redacted] There is scope for development here. The hints of others could be seeded in gradually, when Antonia pulls up the carrots and finds the wool, and then later the pen. [redacted]

p.220. Jim says she [redacted] This is a powerful moment, though I didn't quite know what to make of it or how to read it. (It reveals why so much information is withheld earlier.)

p.235. The scene with Jim's wife is effective, though the information/gossip about [redacted] could be more subtly handled. The talk of [redacted] feels a bit too literal. (Again, this thread [redacted] could be woven through the manuscript in hints and clues.)

p. 251. [redacted] has come looking for Antonia. [redacted] This is a good twist. I wonder if there is some way of weaving hints of this in earlier? [redacted]

At the end, he runs away rather than checking whether Antonia is [redacted] This may be worth pulling out further.

Overwriting

In common with many early drafts, you are keeping too strong a grip on the narrative. You can afford to cut right back. (In an early draft, we are finding our way and need every detail. Once it is in place you can cut it back and allow more space for the reader to engage by interpreting the action for themselves.) There is too much interior monologue and rumination. You can cut back on this radically. Often what is not said can be just as effective.

I would also recommend that you revise how you write about fear. Often you do not need to describe bodily reactions. There is an overuse of f*roze, real, imagination, breathe, terror, horror* [redacted]-You will find once you have established the territory of the novel, that you don't need to keep telling the reader how Antonia feels. Instead allow them to fill in the blanks for themselves.

Perspective

You can afford to modulate the distance between character and voice, moving from her thoughts to a more detached, almost impartial description of her surroundings.

Prose Style

Your use of short sentences adds to the sense of tension, though there is a lot of repetition. Try reading passages aloud. Be wary of lapsing into a conversational tone. Stay within the period in terms of a level of formality in the use of language.

In terms of repetition, often you can simply cut back, but at other times, you may need to find fresh ways of expressing variations on a theme. Read other novels consciously. Expand your vocabulary.

I can see you have concentrated on plot. As you become more aware of prose style you can polish and refine accordingly.

- **Metaphors.** The metaphor of [redacted]-is used repeatedly. It may be worth thinking about how this metaphor might be expanded. The later mentions can be cut. For metaphors to be effective, they need to be used sparingly.

- **Clauses.** You often use two phrases, where one would be stronger. See page 157. [redacted]-

- **Adverbs.** Use sparingly. Try to aim to strengthen the verb instead. See page 3/4. *She shut the door behind her silently. (*'Shut' suggests a noise.) [redacted]

- **Attributions around Speech.** Often this can be cut back**.** If the dialogue is strong enough, the attribution may not be necessary. [redacted] You can allow the reader to interpret scenes for themselves. You will also find that *'she thought'* is often unnecessary. If you cut them back, the prose will flow more easily.

- **Qualifiers.** See page 3/4. *Even, only.* Often you can simply cut them out.

- For a good guide to prose style, Stephen King's *On Writing* is excellent.

Presentation

It is a good idea to present your work professionally from the outset. Confident presentation will impact positively on content.

- **A manuscript is a visual document.** We read visually. Think about how your manuscript looks. Think about chapter headings. Look at novels you admire. Design your title page and make sure it includes all the relevant information. I would recommend using a smaller type face for the title. (This will look more confident rather than less.) Make a decision about how you want your chapter headings to look. (As this is an historic novel, this is likely to be a classic style.)

- **Formatting.** The industry standard is to use double spacing, right aligned text and even spacing between paragraphs. I have reformatted your manuscript for ease of reading, as you will see. [redacted]

- **Layout.** Start each new chapter on a new page. (Insert line space at the end of a chapter.)

- **Numbers.** Write as words. (Up to three figures.) *Nine, ten.*

- **Elipses …** Use sparingly. (Also dashes.)

Recommendations

Before you think about a redraft, I would recommend that you take a step back and do some background work.

- Produce a story outline.
- Write a premise.
- Write a page about Antonia.
- Write a page about the house.
- [redacted]
- Draw up a new story outline.

Conclusion

You have written a very promising manuscript with the potential to attract interest. You have also set yourself a number of challenges! I hope this appraisal will give you some insight into the current manuscript and what you might wish to aim for.

Perhaps the key issue is what do you want to leave the reader with? If you think about it most successful novels linger in the mind for one reason or another. If you are not careful, your ending could be read [redacted] This would effectively undo all the work of creating the reality of the world you have created.

If [redacted] it does rather throw the whole premise into question. From the reader's point of view, this feels unsatisfactory. Is this just a story about a young woman who [redacted] If on the other hand, [redacted] this raises a number of questions and possibilities.

I realise that this assessment throws up more questions than it answers but writing successful fiction *is* a challenge. That is part of the joy of it. You are attempting something really quite ambitious here. Take it one step at a time. You have a bold vision here, and one with substance and potential. Take it one step at a time. I am sure that the answers will come to you.

I wish you the best of luck with it.

Best wishes

Follow-Up and Feedback

We will be happy to answer any questions on points of clarity and welcome your comments. Once you have had time to absorb the contents of this appraisal we would appreciate your feedback as it allows us to constantly improve and update our services. What aspects of this appraisal did you find helpful? Were any aspects unhelpful? How could it have been improved? We value your opinion.