

WHAT'S A CRITIQUE? by Julie Pitzel

A critique includes criticism.

I thought that was self-evident, but I was mistaken.

At a recent event, my husband and I signed up to take part in critique sessions with local published authors. We would get ten minutes to present a few pages and have those pages critiqued. We've participated in these sessions before and it's fun and informative to get professional strangers' opinions.

I was assigned to the Saturday session. The two authors who were on the panel enjoyed my short story. They pointed out things that worked and they pointed out things I could do to improve the story. Normal critique behavior.

My husband was assigned to the Sunday session. Unfortunately, the moderator of that session seemed to think everyone was there to form a critique group rather than to get a few pages reviewed by professionals. He had participants introduce themselves, and rather than strictly the professionals providing a critique, he invited everyone to give input. That's not necessarily a bad thing, but it takes more time. So rather than presenting a few pages and getting experienced feedback, participants in this session only had time to present one page each and received feedback from a handful of writers with varying degrees of skill. *Not* what we signed up for.

And then the kicker.

As the first critique began, the moderator stopped the proceedings and told everyone to only say nice things about the work presented. Only. Nice. Things. That's not how critiques work (see my opening statement).

The act of critiquing involves providing judgement on someone else's work. Without judgement, without pointing out the flaws, it's not a critique, it's praise.

Don't get me wrong, I am not against praise. Most of us, especially when we started out, needed someone to read our scratchings and declare them good. It didn't matter if we knew they were reading some of the worst dreck ever spilled onto a sheet of paper. It didn't matter that we eventually edited that work until only a single sentence remained unchanged (sorta). It was a balm to our self-image to have our work pronounced wonderful. But while positive feedback and encouragement is important, Aunt Tilly's exclamation that my story is "beautiful and just perfect" doesn't do much to improve my writing.

And that is why we subject our writing to critiques. At least that's why I take part. I know that I'm blind to my words. I know that my setting has a low ceiling, is filled with smoke haze, and smells of sweat and camel dung. But sometimes I need a critique partner's questions, comments, and criticism to realize that I haven't painted that picture for the reader.

That isn't to say that a critique should be a list of flaws. A review that says the premise is infantile, the characters are too-stupid to-live, and a beginning ESL student has better grammar also misses the point. Critiques like that are not only mean, they do nothing to help us improve our writing. There's no reason for feedback to be cruel or to attack the writer. I can only imagine the number of writers--or other artists--who've stopped creating due to hostile critiques. I bet most of us know at least one.

Critiques should be a combination of positive and negative points. Really helpful critiques include a bit of explanation. Instead of simply "You should change your opening line," which may be good advice, adding "because..." with reasons and suggestions transforms that good advice to advice that can be applied to other writing. The thing is, providing those reasons and suggestions forces us to think about why that opening didn't work. And then we're also teaching ourselves, or relearning a forgotten lesson. Critiques, when done well, are a way for both the writer and the reviewer to improve their craft.

To reiterate, critiques include criticism. If you are unable to accept criticism, you are missing out on an opportunity to improve your weaknesses; you're also missing the chance to truly see what you're doing well. Because no matter how much we like Aunt Tilly's praise, we know she also praises the dog for taking his morning poo.

KINDER, MORE HELPFUL ALTERNATIVES TO THE MEAN REVIEW

I like how your plot is shaping, but I'm not sure there's enough conflict to carry a full length novel. You may want to add a line hinting at the deeper conflict to come.

You've done a good job of fleshing out your character without drowning us in backstory. However, she needs a stronger motivation for her actions at the end of chapter one. As it's written the risk is too great for limited payout.

I've removed a number of unnecessary commas, and added a few that were missing. You may want to check out Strunk & White's Elements of Style, or run your pages through a program like Grammarly to get a better handle on which grammar rules you're breaking.

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