

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

I enjoyed reading your manuscript and believe it has much potential as a romantic suspense novel. The sexual tension between Andrea and Thomas works very well as they set out to solve the mystery of the “ghost maker,” while moving toward greater intimacy. Suspense builds while they are tracking clues. It’s evident you’ve put a great deal of thought into the construction of the plot as well as the characters. That being said, I would like to discuss ways you can revise your manuscript. In this critique I will examine various aspects of the novel, including characters, point of view, dialogue, plot, narrative technique, and theme. I will make observations, suggest possibilities for revision, and then reiterate the main points. I will also address the changes made during copyediting.

### Characters

**Katherine/Cathy:** What is Cathy’s last name? I was intrigued with Katherine in the opening section and disappointed when she disappeared so quickly from the story. Her malice makes her fascinating. I see her as a split personality, rather like Norman Bates in *Psycho*. On the surface she is a perky, friendly, helpful receptionist, but underneath that facade she is a tortured soul with a knack for destroying everything she touches. Even her alter ego is complex. On the one hand, she wants to be everything she imagines Andrea to be, as though she were still competing for her adoptive mother’s attention. On the other hand, she simply wants to crush Andrea and eliminate her altogether. Unfortunately, her delving in black arts has left her with few options. Having traded her soul for demonic powers, she now has absolutely nothing to lose.

Have you considered developing this character more fully and interweaving her story with Andrea’s?

Have you considered developing Andrea’s response to seeing Cathy? I find it odd that she doesn’t see through the facade. It seems to me that her initial response at least would have been more insightful—before Cathy began sapping her psychic abilities.

p. 156 In this scene Andrea has a one-sided phone conversation with Cathy. I suggest you change this narrated scene to a scene with dialogue. It may be challenging, as you want to show Cathy’s mask slipping a tiny bit, so readers will be prepared for the scene near the end when Cathy tries to kill Marilyn Shaffer.

Have you considered letting Cathy live and/or allowing her to tell more of her story? What if Thomas shoots the gun out of Cathy’s hand or merely incapacitates her? That would allow her to tell more of her story.

[On a side note and in reference to the Nietzsche quotation: Doesn’t Thomas run the risk of becoming a monster simply by being able to “shoot to kill”?]

Why does Katherine wait so long to get revenge? It's been twenty-five years since she murdered her adoptive mother. Since then she's been married five times, given birth to children that were taken from her, and apparently flunked out of college. Now she is employed as a receptionist for Marilyn Shaffer. How long has she been working there? Did she take the job in order to be closer to Andrea or was that coincidental—and the main reason for the string of murders—close contact with Andrea?

**Andrea Williams:** At times I want Andrea to be a little more self-sufficient, particularly around Thomas. She has plenty of money and has built a reputation. She knows how to take care of herself. She has amazing powers. Yet here friends are always there for her, cooking meals, handing out lattes and manicures, checking on her when she's had a bad dream.

Suggestion: Have Andrea only gradually come to realize that she needs Thomas in her life. She needs him on the job because he has complementary abilities, and she needs him sharing her bed. (Besides being extremely handsome, he seems to keep the nightmares at bay.) You might do this by starting the story a bit earlier.

Andrea's psychic abilities may present an editorial challenge in dialogue, where her perspective becomes a bit intrusive. When I copy edit I try to keep the POVs separate, so I move Andrea's responses to her own paragraph. Here's an example of what I mean: "We're going to bed to sleep?" he says with a wicked grin as we head into my bedroom. The wine is definitely giving his nerve a boost. And the desire wins!"

The underlined portion should either be rewritten to show that Thomas is thinking it, or it should be moved below to Andrea's paragraph.

A few more questions I had: What does Andrea look like? What color are her eyes and hair? How tall is she? How much does she weigh? How tall is she in relation to her friends? Does she look up at Thomas, the Norse god? How long has Andrea been seeing Dr. Shaffer?

**Nora:** Andrea's best friend is too good to be true. She's just broken up with her husband and she's met that human aphrodisiac, Thomas Wilson. You could add some tension to the story by having both O and N fall for Thomas. That would allow you to augment Nora's jealousy (as it is, there's just a tiny bit) and create more conflict in the novel. Nora's self-sufficiency might make her less attractive to Thomas in the long run. He needs to be needed. It might be a good idea to make Nora better looking than Andrea is.

**John and Juan:** You do a good job of distinguishing these two characters and they are quite likable. But at times they seem a little two dimensional and even a tad stereotyped. One thing I wondered: why is John taking a class when they've just opened a spa? It seems surprising that he has so much time to cook and clean at Andrea's place when he has a business to run.

**Marilyn Shaffer:** What a great psychotherapist! I love her exercise ball therapy. As I think of her in relation to the plot, I wonder if you've thought of getting her more directly involved in Andrea's quest for answers—simply by asking the right questions. And if Cathy were to overhear what goes on during therapy, it would give her a motive for making Shaffer, and not Thomas or Nan, the next victim.

Describe this character too. You can do this in the beats. Example: "She pushed her wire rim readers up and gazed at me with sympathetic brown eyes."

**Thomas Wilson:** I've heard it said that in every amorous relationship there is a lover and a beloved. The Andrea-Thomas relationship seems a bit too good to be true because they seem to love each other equally. (Andrea's reading Jane Austen, so maybe model the plotline along the lines of *Pride and Prejudice* or *Emma*? In both those plotlines the characters have to change for the romantic relationship to succeed. Why not let Thomas have an already established relationship with someone he's never going to get? (Austen usually does this.) Maybe when he goes off to teach the class, he meets up with the old flame and either renews it or ends it. Again, more conflict adds to the tension and keeps readers reading.

**Babs/Babette L'Angelique:** More information about Babette could be conveyed via flashbacks. You can make those full scenes with dialogue. She's a psychic with special knowledge (Voodoo or Hoodoo? Choose one.) One of the flashbacks should be at the dining room table. Cathy is trying to get her mother's attention and Babette shames her in front of Andrea. Something like that? Maybe Katherine leaves the room muttering, "You'll both pay for this . . ."

I don't think someone with her apparently Creole background would be quoting Nietzsche. Those quotes should come from somewhere else.

Why did Babette teach Katherine voodoo (or hoodoo)? It doesn't seem like a wise thing to do, considering Katherine's personality and background.

**Jensen:** Did I miss something along the way, or does Jensen morph from a female to a male detective, and become a bit more obnoxious in the process?

**Parker:** An interesting character!

**First person/present tense:** This is the POV and tense often used in young adult fiction to give a sense of immediacy. As the audience for young adult fiction includes twenty-somethings, the POV and present tense combo might be fine as is. Yet, it does make it more difficult to deal with

past events. One way to get around the limitations would be to have more than one person's perspective. I suggest you bring in Katherine's first-person perspective throughout the novel. Another possibility: Use the third-person (limited) past tense throughout. Of course, this would entail a complete rewrite.

### **Narrative Technique:**

One thing writers hear a lot is that they need to "show, not tell." In reality, narrative technique is a blend of showing and telling. Early drafts often have more telling than showing, however. If you were to add scenes to explain Katherine's malice toward Andrea, you'd want to use dialogue and create a sense of immediacy. This is the better method because it pulls readers in better than telling does. Here are some scenes you might add:

A scene in which Katherine sees Cathy sitting at the dining table with Babette L 'Angelique during a tutoring session

The scene in which Katherine murders Babette

Andrea attempting to comfort Katherine after hearing of her mother's death

**Dialogue:** The dialogue reads pretty well for the most part. I particularly enjoyed the scene with the suspect and Parker. The suspect was very well-drawn.

In dialogue there are the quotations, the speaking tags (s/he says), and the beats, describing the action. Use a comma with speaking tags and a period with beats. Begin a new paragraph when the POV changes.

Thomas chuckles sleepily. "In your dreams. Goodnight sweet Andrea."

I changed the comma after "sleepily" to a period. "Chuckles" isn't a legitimate speaking tag, so it's a beat. It would be fine to add "and says," though: Thomas chuckles sleepily and says, "In your dreams . . . Andrea." Here's another example:

"Thank you, Lucas," I mutter at him as I practically run into Marilyn's office.

"Mutter" is a speaking tag; hence, the comma. By the way, "says" and "said" are often the best speaking tags because readers don't notice them. Still, I think it's fine to use words like "mutter" and "murmur" because they are descriptive verbs.

**Interior monologue:** This is the character thinking to himself/herself. It can be direct or indirect.

Here's an example of indirect monologue:

He thought she looked good in her new coat.

Indirect monologue is used often to create a seamless effect in a scene.

Direct monologue: is used more sparingly for effect and is often italicized.

*Oh my god she looks good!*

### **Plot:**

The “prologue” introduces the killer’s perspective and motive and provides the reader with evidence that Andrea and her team don’t have. We then move to Andrea’s story, which is that of a gifted psychic working to solve serial murders. Andrea has fallen for Thomas and the two are spending more “down” time together. They’ve just finished solving one murder and are beginning on another. It’s a good thing Andrea has Thomas on her team because the serial murderer aims to murder her—after picking off her coworkers and friends, one by one. Only by delving deeply into her past will Andrea be able to solve this one.

I tried to make a timeline but found it somewhat challenging as the days are seldom identified. Moreover, everyone seems to be working 24/7, including Marilyn Shaffer. The novel has a fluid timeless quality for the most part. How much time goes by from beginning to the end? Does the opening (Katherine’s response to the newspaper article) take place around the time we meet Andrea? You might consider adding dates—month/day throughout. I understand that it is summer, but which month?

### Chap \* Day

- 2: Friday
- 3: Saturday to the following Monday night
- 4: Tuesday
- 5: Wed
- 6: Thurs
- 7: Thurs night
- 8: Fri
- 9: Sat
- 10: Tuesday?
- 11: Sometime afterwards Wednesday

The present-tense events occur within eleven days. It doesn’t seem like enough time for the roof garden to be completed, or even for the characters to change. Of course, it’s long enough to solve the murder, as people are dying.

- Suggestions: Maybe the consummation scene could occur sometime after the murder is solved?
- Consider beginning the story much earlier to show Katherine’s growing wrath.

- Add more conflict throughout. In a romance the conflict tends to be mainly internal, within the character. But as this is also a suspense novel, the conflict can be external too. Adding Katherine/Cathy's perspective and story would add to the conflict. I've made a few suggestions throughout.

*More about the plot:* There are two plotlines, and they are somewhat intertwined: the romance between Thomas and Andrea, interwoven with the couple's joint effort to solve the mystery of the ghost-maker (with the copycat Ripper mystery an important subplot, as is the romance between Nora and Joshua.)

Although the bride killer and the "Ripper" target women, many of them young and very beautiful, the "ghost-maker" has nothing against women in general. This killer is picking off people that happen to be close to Andrea Williams. The killer's adoptive mother, Babette L'Angelique ("Babs"), was quite fond of Andrea when she was in her early teens and in need of a mentor, and her adopted daughter Katherine felt neglected. Katherine's hatred for Andrea fueled her murderous anger and culminated in her murder of Babette. Perhaps because she was only fifteen at the time, she was not a suspect in the investigation that followed. Now twenty-five years later, a second victim has been killed in the same manner. As Andrea begins to put the clues together, another person dies in the same way. Thomas Wilson has a theory about what's going on but refuses to tell Andrea. When the killer fails to kill the next victim, Andrea gets some first-hand information and begins to piece it all together for herself. In the process, she ends up face-to-face with the murderer, who is heavily armed.

Why does Katherine wait all this time to exact revenge? Is there something in her life that caused her to snap?

Why does Andrea fail to recognize Cathy as Katherine until she confronts her in Dr. Shaffer's office?

Does Thomas explain why he comes to Andrea's rescue? I know the police officer let him know where she went, but why was he concerned—particularly when he had the meeting with Morrison?

I do find myself wondering about this relationship. Is Thomas going to be a bit too protective to allow Andrea to continue her work?

**Pacing:** I've suggested some places where very long chapters can be broken into shorter ones, often at the asterisk. (Introductory material may need to be added to newly created chapters to orient readers.) I think pacing could also be improved by fleshing Katherine/Cathy out as a character (perhaps with a couple of flashbacks) and by adding more tension between Andrea and Thomas—perhaps by having Thomas attached to someone else to begin with. My other suggestion would be to add a couple of Katherine/Cathy chapters.

**Setting:** The setting is a bit nebulous, but the street where Andrea's office and condo are located could be called "Williams Avenue." Is the city on the east or west coast? It is summer but which month?

**Time:** the present

**Themes and motifs:** The struggle between good and evil. The redemptive power of love and the destructive power of hate and envy. The worldview is essentially Judeo-Christian, it seems to me, with an openness to the paranormal. The evil is eternal to the human world, with the humans becoming ensnared in it, either deliberately or accidentally. That would (somewhat) account for serial murderers who often destroy the very object they long to possess.

The Nietzsche quotation about those who hunt monsters running the risk of becoming monsters could be more closely tied to the plot. Show Andrea and Thomas running the risk of becoming monsters. Perhaps Katherine turned into a monster by hunting one down. Is there a monster in her background?

Brainstorm:

Andrea finds out Cathy is using voodoo and tries to counteract it with her own unpracticed spell, which goes awry. She dreams she looks in a mirror and Cathy's face snarls back at her. She realizes she's in danger of becoming a monster and tries another tactic.

Before Katherine's adoption, she witnessed all sorts of unsavory things, as the daughter of a prostitute and her drug-dealing pimp. The pimp beat her severely on a couple of occasions and she never forgot. The pimp was her first victim. While she stabbed him, she gazed into a mirror and his eyes seemed to gaze back. Something in her has changed forever. . .

**Voice/mood:** The voice is casual, somewhat confessional. The mood is surprisingly bright, considering that the main characters grapple with evil for a living. I love the references to good food shared with friends. Andrea, Thomas, and the others know how to have a good time. This world seems like paradise compared to the hellish world they glimpses as they track down the killers.

**imagery:** monsters, god versus evil, light versus dark, etc. Thor the giant killer. (Wilson) (Is that why he shoots Cathy?)

**Other forms of communication:** Email, reports, etc. You can set this apart from the narrative by using different fonts and indenting.

**Language:**

Style (word choice/sentence length and structure):

*Word choice:* Your diction is good and you write quite well. As you read through you will notice repetition and can remedy that by using synonyms. I have done that for you or made suggestions in places.

*Grammar:* Only a few of the most common sorts of errors anyone can make.

*Sentences:* Many of the sentences are compound sentences. It would help the flow to break them down into simple sentences or turn them into complex sentences. I have done this for you in many places in Track Changes.

*Punctuation:* Most of the corrections are in the dialogue, to distinguish beats from speaking tags.

### **Copyediting**

Are you familiar with using Track Changes? Aside from a couple of pages, when I turned off Track Changes by mistake, the corrections are clearly marked. You can go through them and accept or reject each change. You will notice comments too.

Although I went through this a couple of times, it is quite possible I missed some errors along the way, as my focus was on developmental editing. Rest assured though, it is considerable cleaner than before. Please let me know if you have any questions about any of the changes.

I do think you can add material to this novel—up to 75,000 words is a good length for this genre and you're below 70,000 words at this point. Stretching out the timeline and adding flashbacks to provide Katherine with more of a motive would be a good way to go.

Sincerely,

Melanie M. Austin, editor