

Notes to the author

Yiu-On Li ·  WRIT 151B · May 1, 2023

Marks

- Chicago recommends no spaces between em dashes: consider updating.
- p221
 - “huge, streaming lights” → “huge streaming lights”
 - Consider reducing the number of instances that “monstrous” or some variant is mentioned. While it may be an important theme, readers may find the repetition repetitive and confusing.
 - “mini-dress” → “minidress”
- p222
 - “more decay, and not terrorism” → ‘more decay, not terrorism’
 - “for bras read: ‘Who Needs Inner Beauty?’ and someone . . .” → “for bras read, ‘Who Needs Inner Beauty?’, and someone . . .”
 - “You do asshole,” → “You do, asshole.”
 - If you mean that the animal is half-tiger, half-another-animal, consider “a half-tiger.” If you mean that half of a tiger shows up on the poster, consider “half a tiger.”
 - “once been well regarded” → “once been well-regarded”
 - “cool, porous cheek” → ‘cool porous cheek’
 - Readers may be confused whether the phrase “it fails to catch the light and flash” means “it fails to catch the light and it fails to flash” or “it fails to catch the light and it flashes.” Consider clarifying.
 - “during the last ten years we’ve met several times” → “during the last ten years, we’ve met several times”
 - Consider smoothing out the chronology in the first three sentences of the last paragraph. For example, consider using “fifteen years ago” as the first sentence and expanding on “ten years” in a later paragraph. Doing so may help readers keep better track of time in the story.
- p223
 - “and fantasized” → “and I fantasized”
 - Consider describing these “painful and complicated situations” in greater detail.

- “large, bright polka dots on it” → “large bright polka dots”
- The cat does not seem to be mentioned later in the story. Consider removing the mention for the sake of concision.
- “warm, dim, creaking old coach” → “warm, dim, creaking-old coach”
- “radiant, declaiming sky” → “radiant declaiming sky”
- “enrapt, answering sea” → “enrapt answering sea”
- p224
 - There is once again some repetition here in the form of “monsters” and “small and naked.” Consider using different words to describe these concepts: repetition can be poetic, but readers may find too much of it to be inelegant.
 - “editor-in-chief” → “editor in chief”
 - Consider describing what “real confidence and its flimsy counterfeit” sound like.
 - Since “monster” and some variation has already been referenced numerous times (sometimes in consecutive sentences), consider describing “monsterless” or using a different word.
- p225
 - “dark, glandular warmth” → “dark glandular warmth”
 - “we impulsively kissed, and separated quickly” → “we impulsively kissed and separated quickly”
 - “dark, sucking heat” → “dark sucking heat”
 - “cold, light-echoing wake” → “cold light-echoing wake”
 - For consistency with earlier quotes, consider adding quotation marks to the quotes in the second half of the page.
- p225–26: Consider describing “suddenly drenched with color and identity” or deleting the statement. The punchy “I was the girl to be sawed in half” may already show enough for you.
- p226
 - Readers may find “my heart pounded” to be somewhat cliché. Consider describing Dani’s feelings in a different way, or consider deleting the line.
 - Consider deleting some of the adjectives and adverbs in the sentence beginning with “I woke on the winding avenue.” Readers may appreciate the added concision: the sentence, as it is now, does not seem to be a crucial one to the story, so it may be worth skipping over it.

- “and modestly revert as soon as we left it, smoothing” → “modestly reverting as soon as we left it and smoothing”
- “dark, curved shapes” → “curved dark shapes”
- “a song that went: ‘Let your love come through’” → “a song that went, ‘Let your love come through’”
- Consider expanding on the quote beginning with “I’m done with you.” Readers may find the phrasing unnatural, and it states exactly what the father wants instead of leaving it up to the reader’s interpretation.
- p227
 - “stated my father” → “my father stated” (consistency with other quotes)
 - Consider reworking or removing the quote “the thought makes me sad and a little ashamed.” It states exactly what Ella feels without giving the reader room to imagine her feelings.
 - “and paused” → “and she paused”
 - “finished Dani” → “Dani finished”
 - Consider deleting “snakily.” Readers may find it redundant with “snake” earlier in the sentence, and the verb “wound” may already do enough describing.
 - “said Dani lightly” → “Dani said lightly”
 - “Down the hall and to the right” → “We walk down the hall and to the right”
 - “flush against” → “flush with”
 - “on a lavender bike, and says” → “on a lavender bike and says”
- p228
 - “drawing it out, ‘just some girl’” → “drawing it out. ‘Just some girl’”
 - Consider rewording “poignantly echoes hers.” Readers may find this to be too much telling and not enough showing. If you really wish to keep this line, consider removing “poignantly”; readers may find “echoes” to be a strong enough verb.
 - “verdant, private world” → “private verdant world”
 - “pink, allergic eyes” → “allergic pink eyes”
 - The sentence beginning with “Dani’s confidence lay” and the quote beginning with “I feel like people accept” may reveal too much of Dani’s character and leave too little to the reader’s imagination. According to Stephen King, keeping some of your cards hidden will allow the reader

to substitute people from their own life into the story, improving the connection they have to your world.

- Consider differentiating the dialogue between Ella and Dani for each speaker. Stephen King suggests that dialogue should implicitly reveal the speaker's character: quotes should do more than move the plot forward.
- “rough-textured, and layered in a ragged way” → “roughly textured and layered in a ragged way”
- p229
 - “hot, dry little sound” → “hot, dry, little sound”
 - “sweet sad cave” → “sweet, sad cave”
 - “darkish colored bulbs” → “darkish-colored bulbs”
 - If you mean that Ella and Dani had met at a book fair in Las Vegas before, consider a wording like “we met at the book fair in Las Vegas again.” If you mean that Ella and Dani had met before but at a different place, consider a wording like “we met again, this time at the book fair in Las Vegas.”
 - “During the day the book fair was a bland caravan parked inside a pallid amphitheater tented with beige, a series of stalls and tables draped with colorless cloth and laden methodically with books” → “During the day, the book fair was a bland caravan parked inside a pallid amphitheater tented with beige — a series of stalls and tables draped with colorless cloth and laden methodically with books”
 - Consider showing or deleting “ecstatically and predictably.”
 - “carnie” → “carny”
 - “projecting intently, rather coldly forward” → “projecting intently, rather coldly, forward”
 - Consider deleting “who has since become an actor.” The detail does not appear to be relevant to Ella and Dani's relationship; it may be beneficial for reader immersion to use the extra space expanding on said relationship.
- p230
 - Consider deleting “pungently but only dimly.” The noun phrase “the terse movement of her lean arm” is already very descriptive.
 - “fake-leather book” → “faux-leather book”
 - Consider reworking or removing the quote beginning with “Oh, that's all right.” The quote may reveal too much to the reader.

- Consider reworking or removing the quote and section beginning with “Don’t you see why that is?” The quote perhaps veers too closely into character analysis, and readers may find the phrasing unnatural unless they have friends who frequently psychoanalyze them.
- p231
 - “or went with her” → “or I went with her”
 - “poetry reading/performance” → “poetry reading”
 - “it was almost not there at all” → “the tents were almost not there at all”
 - “dark, wet grass” → “wet dark grass”
- p232
 - Consider reworking the quote beginning with “I don’t want to be unfaithful anymore,” perhaps by having Dani describe her relationship with Yasmin and having that suggest that she doesn’t want to be unfaithful anymore.
 - Readers may find the phrase “heart pounding with fear” to be somewhat cliché. Consider describing it more or removing it.
 - “It wasn’t empty, it was more that” → “It wasn’t empty; it was more that”
 - Consider rephrasing the sentences that begin with “I quickly became lost.” The sentences may describe the character’s feelings too much without leaving enough to the imagination.
 - “She did not want to be the older lesbian going after young girls, did not have the heart for it” → “She did not have the heart for it, did not want to be the older lesbian going after young girls”
 - Consider rephrasing “she was very lonely” and the similar lines succeeding. Describing the ways in which Dani feels sad—her actions—may be more effective in conveying sadness to readers.
 - Consider rephrasing or removing “a tawdry metaphor for any kind of affair.” Readers may find such a line more fitting in an analytical essay.
- p233
 - “fun house memory” → “fun-house memory”
 - Consider removing some of the adverbs and adjectives in the clause beginning with “where a lustily roaring hotel shower.” While the excess of descriptors may show Ella’s sensory overload, readers may find this excess to be distracting in a negative way.

- Consider adding some more character to Dani and Ella’s exchange regarding whether David takes care of the latter.
- Consider removing “solemnly” and instead showing solemnity. It may also be more effective to characterize characters rather than inanimate objects.
- Consider reworking or removing the sentence beginning with “each scene covers.” Readers may appreciate finding this kaleidoscope themselves rather than receiving it for free.
- p233–34: Consider reworking or removing the paragraph beginning with “her strength, her social identity, had been stripped from her.” The content of the paragraph may already be evident from the rest of the story, for folks who read closely enough.
- p234
 - Consider removing the reference to “Today I’m Yours” as a song. Readers may find the connection somewhat shoehorned in, especially because it is introduced late in the story and is only mentioned one other time. The idea behind the phrase “Today I’m Yours” may already come through clearly enough from the rest of the story.
 - Consider reworking or removing the trio of sentences beginning with “it is a crude and romantic song.” Readers may already be able to tell that “human feeling is crude and romantic” from the rest of the story.
 - “O.K.” → “OK”
- p235
 - Readers may find the connection to “atomic globe” unclear. Consider replacing with another term.
- p236
 - Consider removing the clown imagery: it is introduced in the final lines of the story, and the motif does not seem to connect to others. Readers may thus find the comparisons distracting from the core messages.

Letter

Hi Ms. Gaitskill,

In “Today I’m Yours,” you have constructed a wonderful story about ephemerality, loss, and enduring friendship. Your descriptions soar: you command simple and complex sentences alike to effortlessly draw the reader into your world.

That said, I am still an editor: I have made various marks and suggestions regarding punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and other such matters. In doing so, I have relied on *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 17th ed. (chicagomanualofstyle.org) and *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed. (merriam-webster.com), which are common authorities when it comes to fiction. Because you appear to have preferred an open punctuation style in your story, especially with commas, I have adopted a similar style when reviewing your story.

Your story is already at a strong stage. But there is more that you can do to make it stronger. The chief consideration is dialogue: Stephen King writes in his memoir, *On Writing*, that “what people say often conveys their character to others in ways of which they—the speakers—are completely unaware” (180). In other words, dialogue should do more than move the plot forward or reveal physical aspects about the world: it should stop and shine a light on the speaker themselves. And the shining of the light should not be obvious, lest the story turn into literary criticism.

The dialogue in your story, as it is now, is perhaps very minimalist: it gets straight to the point and states exactly how each character feels. There may not be enough room for readers themselves to interpret the dialogue and to insert people from their own lives into the story, which King notes is important for forming a “bond of understanding” between writer and reader: “description begins in the writer’s imagination, but should finish in the reader’s” (174). Readers may find it difficult to imagine themselves grabbing a coffee with either Ella or Dani, because readers never get to know them very well beyond “the two are in an on-again, off-again relationship and like to write.”

By adjusting your dialogue so that it not only digs into the speakers but also does so subtly, you can further engross readers in the world you are constructing. For example, on page 230, instead of having Ella say to Dani that “you’ve gone out of your way to create a perfect, seductive surface, and people want to believe in perfection,” consider writing an exchange between Dani and Ella (or someone else)

that talks about something completely unrelated to seduction and perfection but that reveals seduction and perfection for readers who look closely enough.

Your descriptions soar, as I mentioned earlier. But some soar more than others, and others perhaps need more work to take flight. Some descriptions run into similar hurdles as the dialogue does: they tell more than they show. For example, on page 229, Dani's hips are described as "projecting intently, rather coldly forward," which anthropomorphizes body parts to describe personality. King advises against this emphasis on body parts, which he describes as "a shortcut to character"; instead, consider having Dani perform an action or two that show her intense and cold projection, without explicitly using the adverbs "intently" and "coldly" (175).

Also be vigilant for adverbs, adjectives, and clichés, such as "heart pounding with fear" and "almost everyone I met was lost too": many writers have used these or similar constructions before, and readers will almost certainly appreciate seeing more of your fresh-honeydew descriptions in the same vein as "this fervid red rectangle or this blue one" (232; 233).

It is possible to argue that many of the concerns I have raised in this letter—the dialogue, the telling instead of showing, the clichés—merely further the dreamlike atmosphere of the story; as such, they are additions rather than detractions. This is a valid interpretation; certainly, fiction is full of different interpretations, and what is to one's taste may not be to another's. But it is also important to consider whether the reader is satisfied while reading a story: perhaps an analysis of the story would prove intellectually rewarding, but if the reader is not enjoying the reading in the moment that they are reading it or even after they have finished reading it, then it may prove fruitful to sacrifice some intentional jaggedness for plain beauty.

I hope you will consider what I have written here. Your story can soar ever higher, and I look forward to seeing where you will fly.

Best,
Yiu-On