

17. The Last Hurdle

Can you really handle it? After perhaps a year of living with this novel, of having it live inside your head and your heart until you can't remember a time when it wasn't there occupying your existence, can you bear the commentary, dare I say it, criticism of your chosen readers? Well, you know what, you don't have to? You can choose to ignore it, choose to bury your head in the sand. You can even choose to take it all personally and even argue with your readers.

But what would be the point? It's true that every reader sees something different in a novel and what appeals to one might not appeal to another. There are those who thrive on Dickens and Hardy and other classics while others have difficulty wading through the classics. Ireland has its James Joyce following, its Bloomsday, when an anti James Joyce club could just as easily be formed, should one wish to spend time and effort on it.

So, why choose a critical readership at all. For several reasons. The first, and simplest criteria for taking criticism seriously is this: where two or more of your readers have consistently uncovered the same weaknesses, or flaws in the novel then it is most likely weak in those areas, either in vocabulary, consistency of language and style, or even in credibility of characterisation. Whatever the flaw, if it is validated by more of your readers then it is most likely appropriate to take it seriously and where possible to correct it. The editor of a publishing house, being a reader, albeit a professional one, will encounter exactly the same things as your readers.

Where one of your chosen readers dislikes an aspect of the story, and another likes it, observe the difference between these readers, because this might be a good indication of the market your book will appeal to, and being able to make this kind of distinction when writing your proposal for the publishers will illustrate your competence and your ability to define your work, and this is attractive to publishers.

I have often read work for other aspiring novelists, and what bothers me and annoys me, is when, after having sifted through the novel, analysed its strengths and weaknesses, formulated them as best I can, on presenting them to the writer, he/she digs their heels in, doggedly defending the work, refusing to take on board any of the comments. Even when I have picked out aspects that are repeated by other readers, some writers refuse to hear the commentary. These writers hand out their manuscripts for the sole purpose of receiving praise, and are not open to anything else. I try to avoid this kind of stubbornness, though it is extremely difficult to hear anything negative about this opus, this life's project, but if your ultimate goal is publication (maybe it isn't!!!) then a final edit is unavoidable.

The reader is evaluating the work, is being a real friend by investing time and energy in your project. Any criticism is of the work, not of you, the person.

Finally, sift through the critiques, and where possible, correct and improve your work. Jump that last, and seemingly highest hurdle before you truly go public.