



Fiction Feedback

Reviewer A: *Thriller 2014* by Author Anonymous

Thank you for the opportunity to read your entry for the CWA Debut Dagger; I've quoted a few pieces from their advice to writers within this review. This is an interesting beginning to the story and sets out the stall for your action thriller. However, it's set out rather *too* clearly – hold back some of the information about your central characters and intrigue the reader more. This will help you develop the “wow factor” by surprising your readers and hooking them into your story, as they won't be able to predict what's going to happen next.

First Chapter

A successful first chapter should draw one in, introduce one to the main characters and subject matter, locate one in a chosen world, intrigue, and surprise.

Remember the golden rule of *show don't tell* – for example, in chapter 1 “*For a split second he had no idea where he was*”. Make us feel that sense of disorientation and confusion; the smells are good, plus the sound of rooks – but go into more detail; what can he actually see, and does it look strange from his physical position? Is he in motion or still? What physical sensations is he experiencing? Are we sympathetic to him?

There's a question of plausible biology here – how long can you hang upside down without losing consciousness or dying? Googling the answer suggested death within a range of 8 minutes to 3 days, but the BBC reported that David Blaine, while doing a 60-hour upside-down stunt, had to be inverted the right way up every hour to avoid death or permanent injury. If Powers lost consciousness while upside down (and alone), I doubt that he would regain it. His auto-erotic stunt may need a bit more planning. And in chapter 3, would he really be able to run after being restrained upside down? How much time has passed?

I would be tempted to cut at least some of chapter 3 so we know less of his motivation until chapter 5, as he comes across the cottage. It could be that even then we're uncertain and still see him as an escaped victim.

However this is a gripping opening, positing him as victim of a deranged, would-be killer; the fact that you subvert the reader's interpretation of this later is a good twist. We know immediately that we are in a dark and dangerous world, and we are intrigued by it.

Characterisation

Your synopsis tells of a battle of wits, a game of cat and mouse, between two main characters so these are your two perspectives (protagonist and antagonist) which you need to firmly establish.

In Chapter 2 you introduce three female characters very quickly which is slightly confusing on a first read. From the start, be more in Kate's head and orientate the reader from her perspective, for example, turning to look in the back of the car in response to Gemma, and then to Michelle who is driving. A bit more detail on what the three women look like might be useful.

The men in chapter 2 are far too threatening. I think it would give us more insight into Kate's mental state if the threat was more subtle. As your story is about male violence towards women, show the gradations of this (flirting in an uncomfortable way) and Kate's reaction which may seem excessive (she sees threat here, where in reality it will come from somewhere else). Too much male aggression runs the risk of alienating your readers (male and female, and Scottish!) by making it too uncomfortable a read. By reducing the implied threat, you can highlight Kate's character far more, hinting at previous events. But, don't reveal the information about Kate's past so quickly. Leave it that she is wistful / jealous of Michelle's status as a mother, which leaves the reader wondering why, and potentially sets up an interesting dynamic between the two women (especially as later Kate will become responsible for Gemma). Also, *not* knowing that she has experienced domestic violence and killed her husband makes her responses and actions in this first part of the story far more interesting.

Again let the revelation that the two women have been in prison come out more slowly. This is a really interesting part of your story so weave it in so the reveal has dramatic impact. Domestic violence and prison are areas where you can challenge preconceptions and stereotypes, and the dreaded cliché. Most victims of domestic violence are in fact feisty and do stand up to their abusers, and are not passive victims. But not all former prisoners are tough or rough. The psychology of a survivor is quite complex so how you get inside Kate's perspective is critical.

At the beginning of chapter 4, do Kate and Michelle discuss what has just happened? Do they have different interpretations of or reactions to it? If Michelle is not in the story for long, make their friendship stand out – they have been through hell together, so show the reader the strength of that bond; this will carry over into Kate's commitment to Gemma.

Similarly, be careful with Powers – if he has a double life, we have to believe in both versions. Don't make him a moustache-twirling villain but a complicated individual who is successful in deceiving others and presenting a respectable face to the world. As he turns stalker, leave his motives and needs oblique to keep the reader intrigued, so we're not yet sure of who he is and his role in the story. In terms of this extract, you could leave it more open to interpretation – he may be turning to the women for help, having survived a murder attempt; he may be trying to warn them of danger. Don't play your hand too soon. We want a sense of menace surrounding the women, but not knowing where that menace is coming from is more effective.

Written style

Watch your spelling – midges, not minges! I think this is an example of a malapropism, against which the judges of the Debut Dagger warn... Otherwise your use of language is good and not clichéd.

Highlight every time where you tell rather than show and re-write this so you reveal more about your characters without giving the reader a potted biography! For example, in chapter 4 when Michelle and Kate talk about their ability to fight, you might show them sparring instead, with Michelle taking on the role of teacher. The dialogue in this scene is a little too expositional, rather than naturalistic.

Structure

Structurally, as you have just a 3000 word gambit for the competition, reduce the pace of the action a little and build character. At the moment it's too much too quickly. Start with Powers's auto-erotic attempt, then introduce the three women and their encounter on the road, with Kate's reaction taking centre stage and establishing her as the main point-of-view character. Then Powers perhaps watching them arrive, furtively, but don't give too much away about his motives. To give the required cliffhanger, perhaps Gemma could disturb a figure in the house, but we don't know who...

Tension

Many of the entries that work best grip the reader with a genuine sense of tension. This isn't just about overt danger or violence: it's amazing how dull a gruesome murder can be made to seem if it's written badly. Effective tension comes from a sense of menace and anticipation, built up with mood, little clues and tell-tale signs.

Getting the balance right in a thriller involving sexual violence is very difficult. My advice is to focus on the characters and their motivations and reactions rather than graphic details of the violence itself – the emphasis being on the *psychological* thriller. Mo Hayder in *Hanging Hill* tells a very disturbing but compulsive story of this nature. S.J. Bolton in *Now You See Me* tells a similar tale but for me it was so graphic, I couldn't finish it; it crossed the line. Subtle can be scary; remember the idea that in a horror film, it's the way the walk down the corridor is set up – the lighting, the sounds, the pace, the expressions – that set up the scare, more so than what's actually waiting behind the door. What keeps you reading is caring about the characters.

Synopsis

The synopsis should indicate the proposed narrative arc, and the judge should feel that the author will be equal to the task ahead. The synopsis shows you've got a story worth telling, and the excerpt shows that you know how to tell it.

Your synopsis clearly sets out your story, although expanding on your ending would be good as at the moment it's a little too brief; how does Kate physically as well as

psychologically defeat Powers, and what is the epilogue for her character in terms of the impact of events? How do events resolve Kate's background story?

Your description of Powers's psychological make-up is good; do the same for Kate. Also it would be good to have a sentence or two describing the detectives involved (avoiding cliché and adding to the understanding of how they are crucial to the emotional arc of the story – eg perhaps an inexperienced police officer who is eager to make a mark, but exposes themselves to danger without thinking). Who is the police psychologist? They should be named too as I imagine that they might be a very important character.

Do you have any sub-plots that will impinge on the main action, for example, Kate taking on Gemma in a more permanent way?

The synopsis reads well and indicates an interesting story with ready appeal for the crime / thriller market.

Summary

This is an interesting premise which promises a gripping story. Work on your characterisation and remember the golden rule of *show don't tell*. Build on menace and threat through your characters and depict the violence in a careful and measured way, staying true to the complex psychology of your two main characters.

Good luck with the competition!