



# Fiction Feedback

## Reviewer B: *Thriller 2014* by Author Anonymous

Excitement and pulse-racing stuff with people in situations of grave danger right from the get-go; it's certainly pacy and compelling reading.

The opening chapter intriguingly sets up mysteries which were resolved by chapter 3 in a nice over-turn of our original assumptions. In chapter 1, I was waiting to hear more about how Powers thought he might have ended up in this position, bound naked and suspended upside-down from a tree, and it never came. At the time, the fact there was no conjecture or memory seemed odd. Nor did we sense real panic; we had icy trickles, sweat and bile but I didn't quite touch absolute bewilderment or terror. This lack was of course beautifully explained in Chapter 3. So was the fact we were only given his surname. It's harder to empathise with someone when we don't know their given name. On reading chapter 1, I thought that probably indicated a minor character, and that it told us more than was advisable in the interests of suspense about his likely fate. However, what it really did in the light of chapter 3 was subtly point up someone with whom we have little sympathy: cleverly done.

On the subject of the descriptions in the opening. The general problems with dizziness, nausea and aching limbs are nicely revealed. On my first reading, that is before reaching chapter 3, it did occur to me that we might be more struck with his dilemma either if one of these problems was exacerbated and the subject of much angst or if something else relatively minor, the cut on his wrist or a bruised jaw for example, hurt so much it became a driving concern. However, I also think this would make us more likely to empathise, and perhaps explain why he wasn't able to climax, so sticking to the general is probably the best decision. A particularly good aspect of chapter 1 was the smells Powers picks up and how they are described; the leaf mould and bark and the fresh earth.

There were problems, though. I didn't understand what was going on with the ropes. We are told that Powers is suspended upside down, tied to a tree branch by a rope round his ankles, and there are ropes binding his hands behind his back. There's also a noose round his neck. Given this, I wasn't sure how he could actually yank on the ropes as we're told he does more than once, as that suggests using his hands. I guess he could jerk his body up and down – and ended up swinging round as a consequence as we're told – but the yanking and gripping we're told about suggests full control of his hands and this didn't seem to the case, especially as they're bound behind him. (And how would he do that to himself? Or are the ties only simulated, which would solve a lot of these pragmatic issues?) I also assumed that if he tried to pull his body upwards that's

when the noose kicked in? It could be clearer in chapter 1; how and where is the noose tied? Or are you deliberately being vague in the light of what follows? If so, it's a risk as the judges must be carried along in chapter 1; you don't want them to start questioning physical practicalities. In situations like this it's first of all essential to be very clear in your own mind exactly what is happening in terms of where ropes are tied, how much freedom of movement there is and what will happen if he tries this or that. Then it needs conveying to the reader, yes in a way that doesn't slow the pace, and you're very good at that, or provide unnecessary detail, but sufficient so that their understanding is clear and they can visualise the scene. At the moment, this falls a little short, although the pace certainly doesn't falter.

I also wondered about the effects on the body of being upside down for a long time. The pain behind the eyes seemed right but I wondered how long someone could remain conscious in this position, or at any rate capable of rational thought. How far would he be able to look round beneath him to see deer, camera and grave? As long as you've done your research and know this is all possible, that's fine. As you know, crime readers expect accuracy in depictions in today's thrillers and that's reflected by publishers and competition judges.

The fact that it turns out Powers can relatively easily get himself out of this position means, of course, you need to be extra careful in what you reveal and what you don't about how Powers is tied in chapter 1. As it is, I couldn't understand how he was able to get out of it in chapter 3. He seems to use his hands for one thing, and for another while in chapter 1 the noose is a factor in chapter 3 it's not even mentioned; he can move his head and neck and haul his body upwards without too much difficulty. This needs to be clearer so we're neither confused in the first place nor feel bewildered or cheated by the escape in chapter 3. Did he only imagine the noose tightening in chapter 1? Was the rope round his hands not properly tied?

Especially good in the light of chapter 3 were Powers' (adopting your usage here rather than the strictly correct but grim *Powers's*) thoughts in chapter 1 about people not being around and no hope of discovery by his family. They were what we'd expect someone to feel who'd been abducted – yet in chapter 3 the true sentiments behind these statements were revealed. Similarly the feelings about the camera; it's a simple question he asks, was he being captured on film, and of course he was hoping so which we don't imagine in chapter 1. I found these elements clever and effortless with no sense of contrivance when reviewed in a second reading.

Chapter 2 also needs a bit of work on the practicalities. The first problem was that Michelle wasn't introduced as the driver of the car for some time which made me very confused – for a few paragraphs I thought the same woman had two names. This got in the way of how I followed the rest of the action so it needs rectifying. I'd suggest it's made very clear from near the top of the chapter how many adults are in the car, what their relationships are to one another and where they're sitting. There was similar confusion between Kate and Michelle later when they're outside the car with Gemma – we don't see Kate leave the car, and we don't know where Michelle is when the men first make their presence felt.

There was a further problem here. While much of the information we're given about Kate is pleasingly involving, there was too much background information supplied at this point. Her history of domestic abuse within her marriage, her miscarriage, her killing of her husband, her guilt and her attempts to reconcile herself, was too much too soon. It slowed the action and felt a little like it was shoehorned in because the author wanted to get across as much as possible right now. I'd certainly recommend keeping back Kate's angst over her killing her abusive husband and how she'd come to terms – it would have much more impact without this paragraph. I have the feeling you're worried, first that a judge won't 'get it' in 3,000 words, and second that a reader might be slow to empathise with Kate if they don't know about her regrets. Don't worry about the first; they're looking for the opening, not signposts to the entire novel. Not empathising with Kate is a slight risk, but one I'd be prepared to take. She looks after Gemma; we know she's on the side of the angels. However, what you might prefer to do is not even reveal the fact she'd killed her husband here and save this juicy dish for later. We don't need to know now and it makes for more mystery ongoing and more powerful revelations further on. The judges will read it in the synopsis.

However, at least her actions now, her past and her thoughts tell us much about Kate as a character. There is a serious problem with Michelle and Gemma. At the moment, neither speak much. Once she's left the car, in chapter 2 the only things Gemma actually does is look at her mobile and turn white. We can kind of understand Gemma's silence given what must seem to her a very disturbing situation but it's hard to feel sympathy for such a passive victim. The trembling lips later at the cabin when they're discussing if the men will follow them to the cabin speak to me of a much younger child and I felt irritated as a result rather than concerned. This could just be my hardheartedness – but it is an idea to give us something more to like about Gemma so we feel the threat to her more keenly. Currently, I don't much care – except Kate does, and I'm starting to care about her.

Michelle we need to see almost as clearly as Kate and she's nearly a blank. She doesn't react at all to the men and what they say for quite some time; it's left to Kate to pull Gemma behind her and to oppose the men. Where is Michelle? What is she doing? If she's wandered off and only returns at a later point, that's fine, but we need to be aware that's where she is. Until she leaps into the action after finishing her cigarette (as though this signified the point when she could defend her daughter, and not before), Michelle might as well not be there; yet she is Gemma's mother. We need to get a strong sense of all three and their differing reactions to their danger.

We only get Kate's reaction to the threat from the men. Yes, the story is shown from Kate's point-of-view and we need to see what she sees and get her perspective, but we can still see an exchange of looks if not whispers between her and Michelle and know that the two adult women at least are of a mind. At the moment, the scene is entirely Kate until Michelle throws away that cigarette. And then, Michelle's ripostes to the man seem not quite logical, not quite what she'd say. I was also concerned that at one point, once Michelle waded in, we stopped seeing the action from Kate's viewpoint. The writing would be stronger if the narrative perspective didn't go more remote at this point but stayed firmly within Kate's head, so we know her thoughts and reactions. Altogether, this section with the men from the van on the track needs careful revision.

The shock we get when we find out Powers' plight in chapter 1 was in fact self-imposed and an auto-erotic act is very pleasing. However, I couldn't help wondering if a person who would get his kicks from such acts would also be a serial abductor and, we assume, rapist and possibly killer. Does this fit the psychosexual profile? Perhaps it doesn't matter but I felt slightly uneasy about it. If there was some reference that Powers himself made to how he was aware his sexual appetites made him unusual, perhaps in the context of that's why he'd not come under suspicion yet (though his married life and son perhaps have more impact in this direction), or something like that, it would be fine. But not mentioning anomalies (if indeed it is one) and leaving the reader to wonder rather than openly acknowledging the fact is not to be recommended. I also wondered about where the abduction kit came from; did Powers have his ski mask, chloroform and so on with him in the woods earlier? However, pace is maintained very well and the expectation of bad things to come ratchets the tension pleasingly.

The revelation that Michelle and Kate have been in prison together is interesting. It piques the reader's curiosity. We know why Kate was in there – don't we? The comment about someone calling her a fat bitch offers another alternative, that she attacked someone else, though it could be that originally she was victimised in prison. If the reader still did not know at this stage that Kate had killed her husband, my opinion is that this section would be more satisfying as our curiosity is piqued further. The fat bitch comment would then work well as a red herring. We currently have no idea why Michelle was serving time and that's fine at such an early stage of the novel.

The description surrounding Powers' vigil and his recollections of past victims was well done and makes for a satisfying read. He is perhaps slightly clichéd as an out-and-out heartless villain but we nevertheless enjoy the details of him hoping Gemma is a screamer and the way he's brought hurtling back to the present by the squirrel, and the way his pulse spikes as he punctures the car tyres. We get a lovely sense of the stillness of the night, the quietness of the rural locale.

Chapter six needs some work. I felt a little dissatisfied at not having seen Powers break in – and surely the women would have been ultra-careful with security given their experience with the men on the track – and appear in Gemma's bedroom clad in his mask and latex gloves. I would have liked to know more about her initial terror. However, this would mean more in Powers' viewpoint as we're currently alternating between his and Kate's. Moving to Kate's viewpoint here means we must start with Gemma's scream and given that, it works well, although as earlier we need just a touch more detail to establish who is where and doing what and when. While Kate was fighting the intruder we assume to be Powers (the mask needs reference), where was Michelle? We know she took Gemma out of danger first but it seems slightly odd she didn't go to help her friend, although this only struck me at second reading; first time the action and excitement kept me oblivious. I enjoyed the way Powers was foiled by the women, and how we already knew he was taking on more than he could guess, given the women's history. A clever unfolding of information.

I did wonder if, to make Gemma more sympathetic as such a pathetic victim, she might have some illness or disability? There's currently an underlying hint of physical or mental illness (fragile, angel face, small), and if we knew it properly we'd feel the extra sympathy

that we need to feel. If she were autistic or had learning difficulties or was physically unwell this would not lessen her appeal to all of our male villains; in fact, it could enhance her vulnerability even if they weren't consciously aware of it.

Overall this is an excellent beginning but on points of practicality in chapters 1 and 3, and on action and character in chapter 2 especially, it does need some work.

The synopsis. I always read this after reading the MS and writing the review as otherwise it risks colouring both. It helped with the auto-erotic/serial killer paradox as it looks like you've researched this and I was wrong to consider it a discrepancy. Nevertheless, if I thought that, so might someone else, so it could be worth considering how you might throw in more of a hint of the research you've obviously undertaken.

The synopsis was a little vague in parts and more detail of each element of the plot line would be useful; especially at the end where it's over-generalised. We also need to know more about Kate's redemption beyond saving Gemma and bringing down Powers. (Is it necessary to kill him? I wasn't sure. He sounds like a good villain who might be useful again in the future.) Does Kate adopt Gemma? Does she find someone to be a friend to her after Michelle dies? She would be unusually strong if she didn't. This kind of sub-plot would round out the novel and give more validity to Kate and make her feel more real. The extreme violence we are obviously going to encounter is so far out of most people's experience that it becomes particularly important to balance it with a heroine rooted in what the reader knows as real life. Romance is an obvious solution and a good counter to the evil of Powers, but it might be more interesting to have Kate find another friend – the detective, perhaps – rather than lover.

Best of luck with your revisions and with the competition.