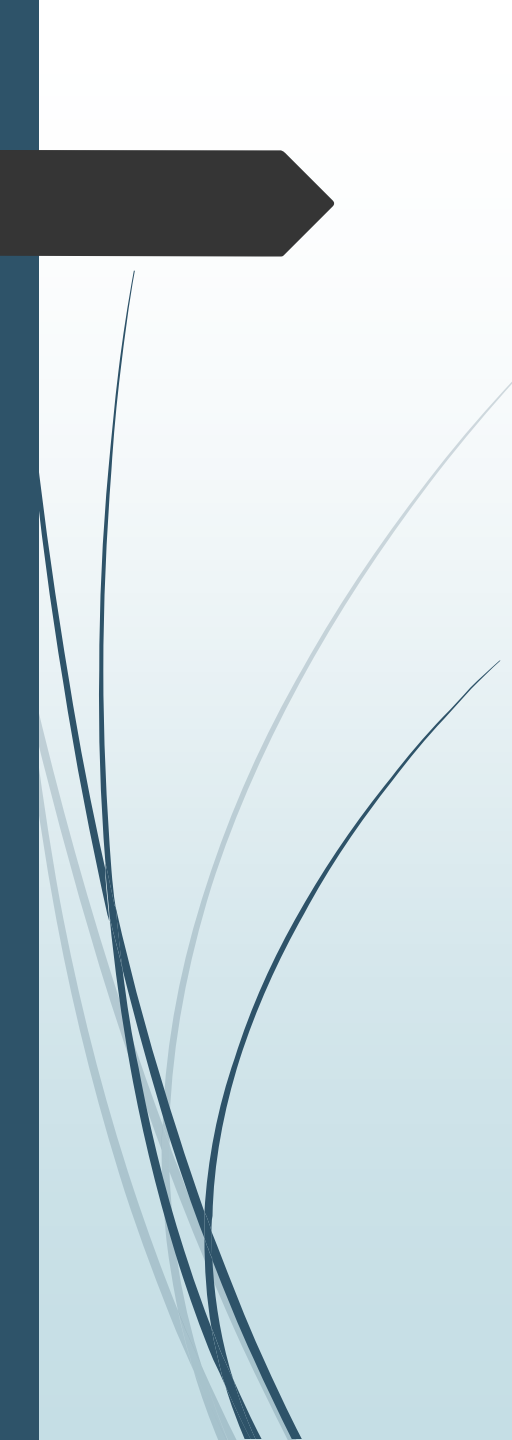




Help a Writer Pull the Weeds: Being a Good Critique Partner

David Rodeback

For Colorado Gold 2026



➤ 1, 4, 2, 18

➤ Boulder

➤ Idaho, Pennsylvania, Virginia, upstate New York

➤ Utah: American Fork, West Valley City

➤ Writing, Russian language, Russian literature

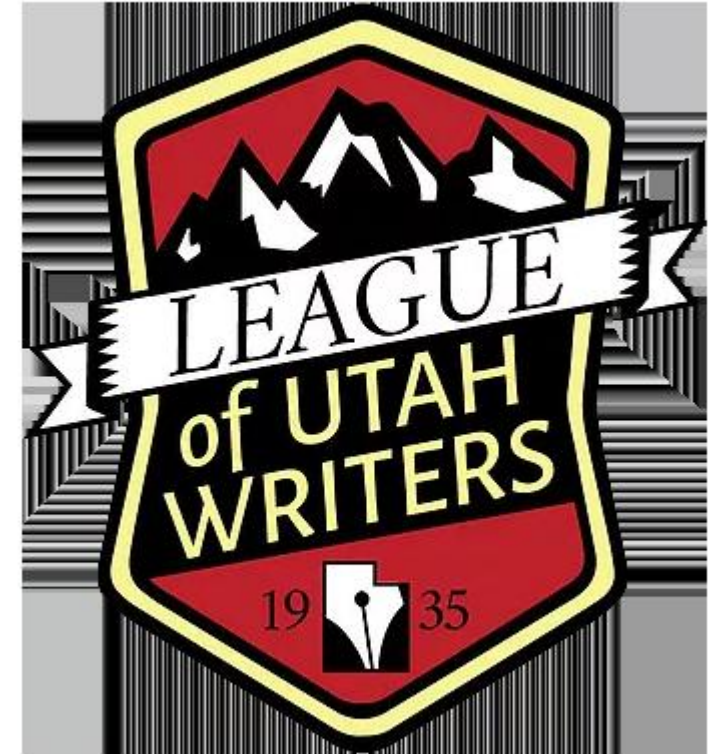
➤ Contemporary, realistic fiction, long and short

➤ Book-length biographical essay about a US soldier

➤ League of Utah Writers 2025 Writer of the Year

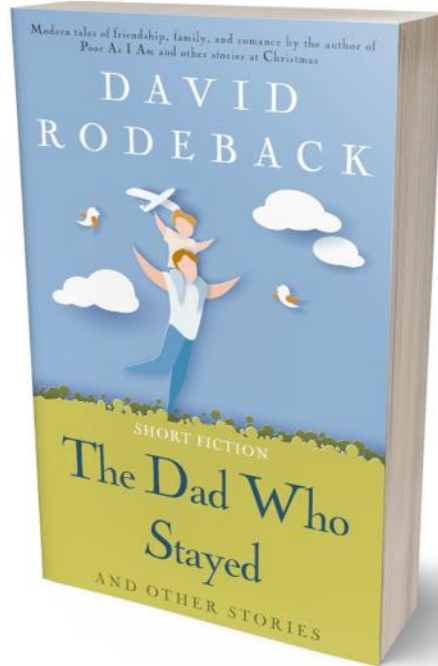
About the League of Utah Writers

- The League has 28 chapters around the state and online (some hybrid). They're all different, tailored to meet the needs and interests of their members. You can also join the League without joining a chapter.
- League membership is only \$30 per year, and \$15 for an additional chapter.
- You don't have to be a Utah resident. The League has members all over the country and a few international members.
- Two conferences for members and non-members:
 - Pre-Quill—one day—April—\$40
 - Quills—four days—early August—member discount
- Publication opportunities in two yearly anthologies and a quarterly literary journal.
- Discounted entry to our spring writing contests—awards announced at Quills—most offer written feedback from professional writers—some offer cash prizes



leagueofutahwriters.com

Acknowledgments



There are twelve short stories and a novella in this collection. Every one of them made its way through a friendly but discerning gauntlet called Good AF Writers (AF is for American Fork), a chapter of the League of Utah Writers. More than a dozen writers there offered helpful critique of at least one of these tales; some saw most or nearly all of them over the past several years. Among them I particularly thank Tim Tarbet, Paul Warburton, Karen Felt, Gayelynn Watson, Cassandra Carlson, Sean Jones, Melissa Lundquist, Dustin Steinacker, and Rebekah Walker—not only for their thoughtful critiques of multiple stories in this collection, but also for years of friendship and encouragement.

My critique partner Silvia O'Dwyer provided valuable early





HUMANITY THROUGH A LENS



UTAH'S BEST POETRY & PROSE 2026

DAVID RODEBACK HEARTS TOGETHER



David Rodeback POOR AS I AM - AND OTHER STORIES AT CHRISTMAS



David Rodeback The Dad Who Stayed and other stories



LUCKY PENNY

write where you belong

2023 LIW ANTHOLOGY

WE ARE DANGEROUS

UTAH'S BEST POETRY & PROSE 2023



SHADOWED HOURGLASS

Lost and Found

METAMORPHOSIS

LUW PRESS

LUW PRESS

Utah Young University 1989



TANKED

KELLY FAE WILSON

Tandem Press

Lord Harcourt's Heist



Gigi Lynn

Dear Lord Wycliffe



Gigi Lynn

Brothers' Tangle



Gigi Lynn

An Honorable Man



Gigi Lynn

The Secrets We Keep

Gigi Lynn

The Lies We Tell

Gigi Lynn

The Masks We Wear

Gigi Lynn

Edited by Gary J. Schmitt

Edited by Gary J. Schmitt

Rise of the Revisionists

AEI

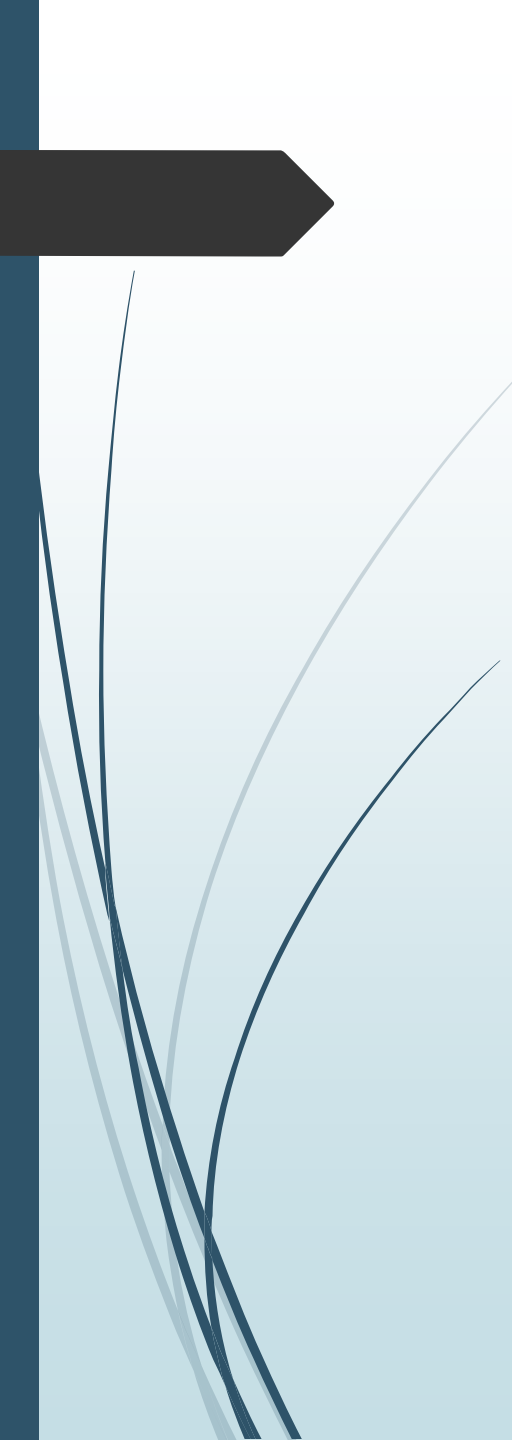
DEFINING
SKILL
IN SELLING

M. TIM WELCH

Vol. 23, No. 2

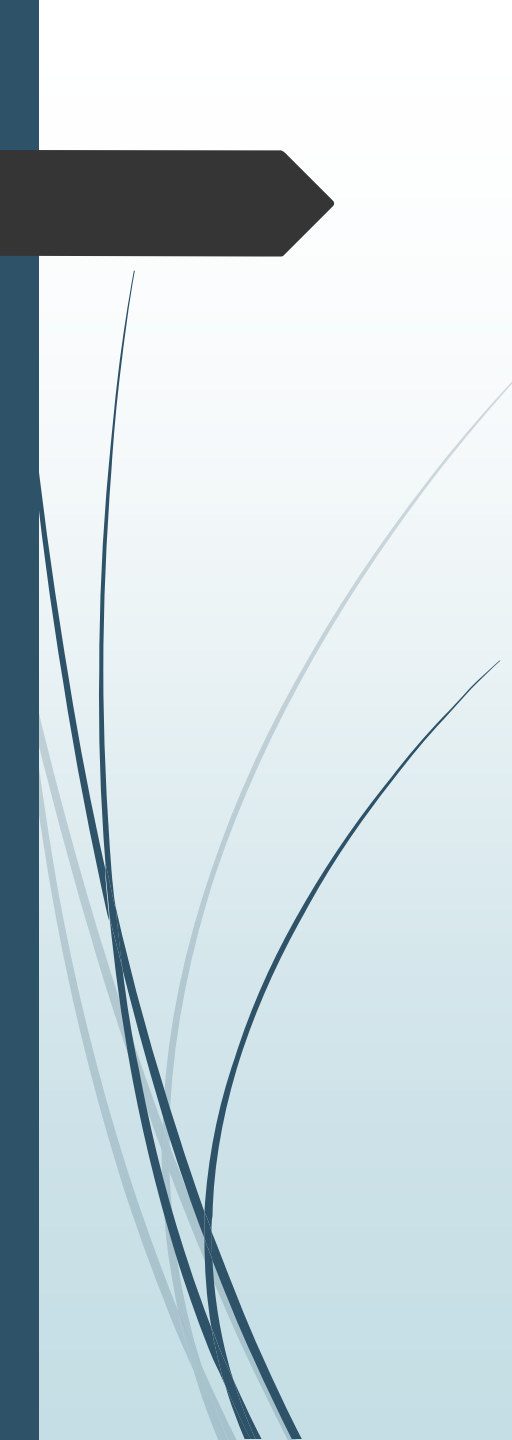
CORNELL INTERNATIONAL LAW JOURNAL

Pages 187-404 Symposium 1993



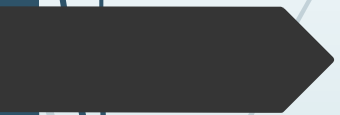
The Map

- Definitions
- Ten thoughts
- If you feel inadequate to critique
- Samples from the trenches
- A useful tool for historical fiction
- Maybe this is encouragement?
- My questions for you
- Ask me anything



Definitions

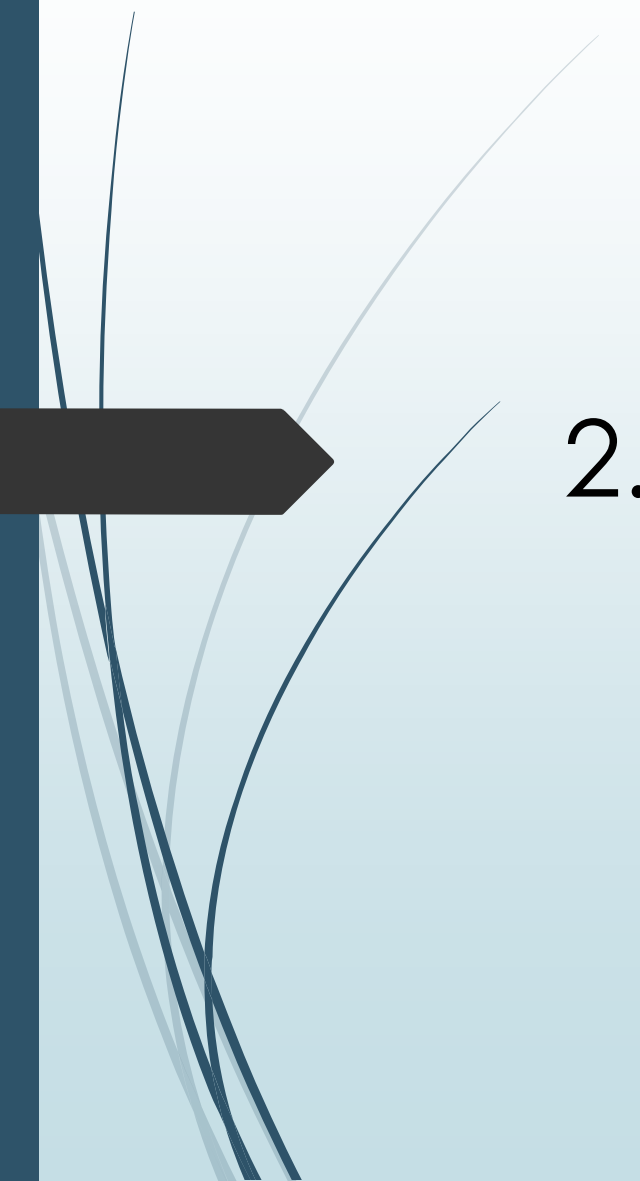
- **Beta reader:** a volunteer (usually) who reads an unpublished but polished manuscript from a reader's perspective and offers notes on such things as:
 - Boring parts
 - Confusing parts
 - Things that bump the reader out of the story
 - Things the story doesn't need to do because it already did them
 - Anything that works especially well
- **Alpha reader:** Reads an early draft, looking for major issues, including plot, character, and thematic problems
- **Critique partner:** relationship is reciprocal, may be long-term
- **Critique group:** a lot like a critique partner, only more so



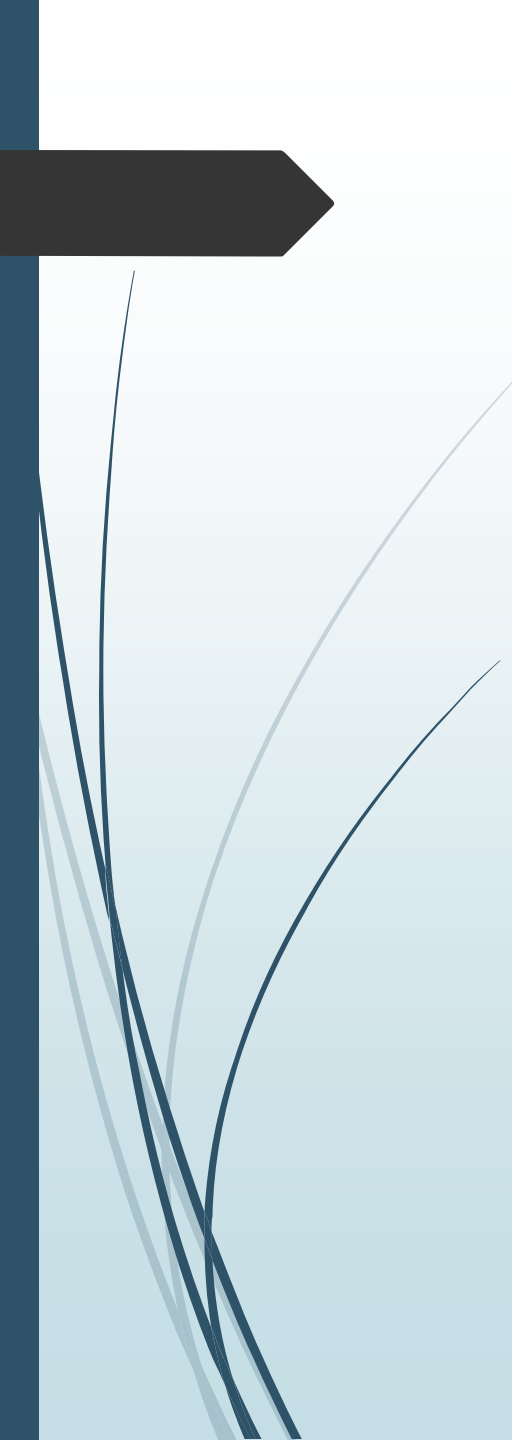
Ten thoughts



1. Writers need critique



2. Only candor is useful

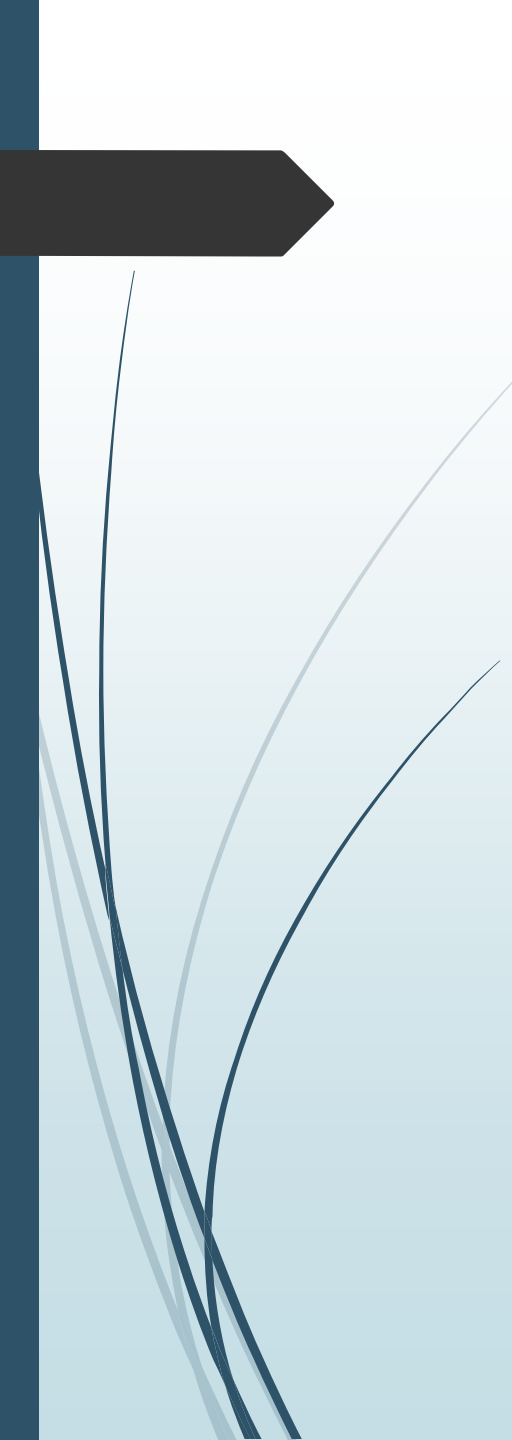


Candor

- Only candor is useful (positive and negative).
- Stir in your people skills. If you find out you've broken something in the relationship, fix it sooner than later.
- Reporting what you like/what works well is important, not just for morale.
- “If you prick us, do we not bleed?” Critique the writing, not the person.

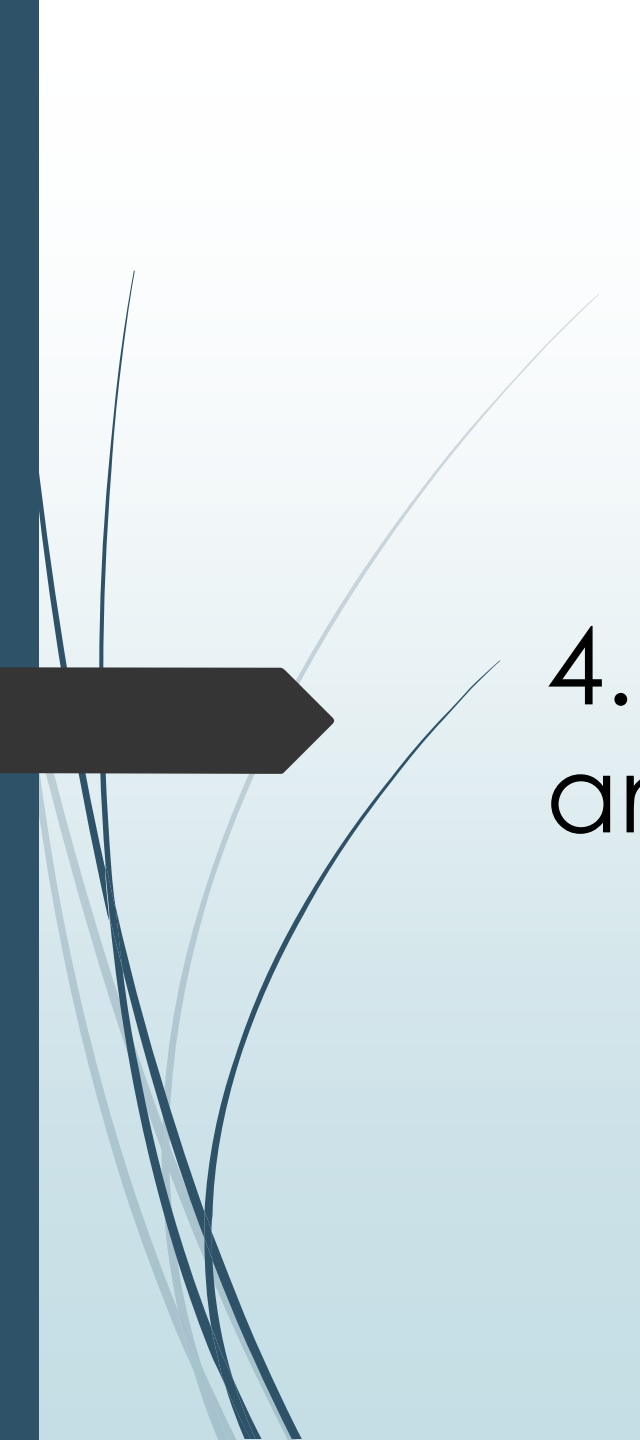


3. The author is the author



The author is the author

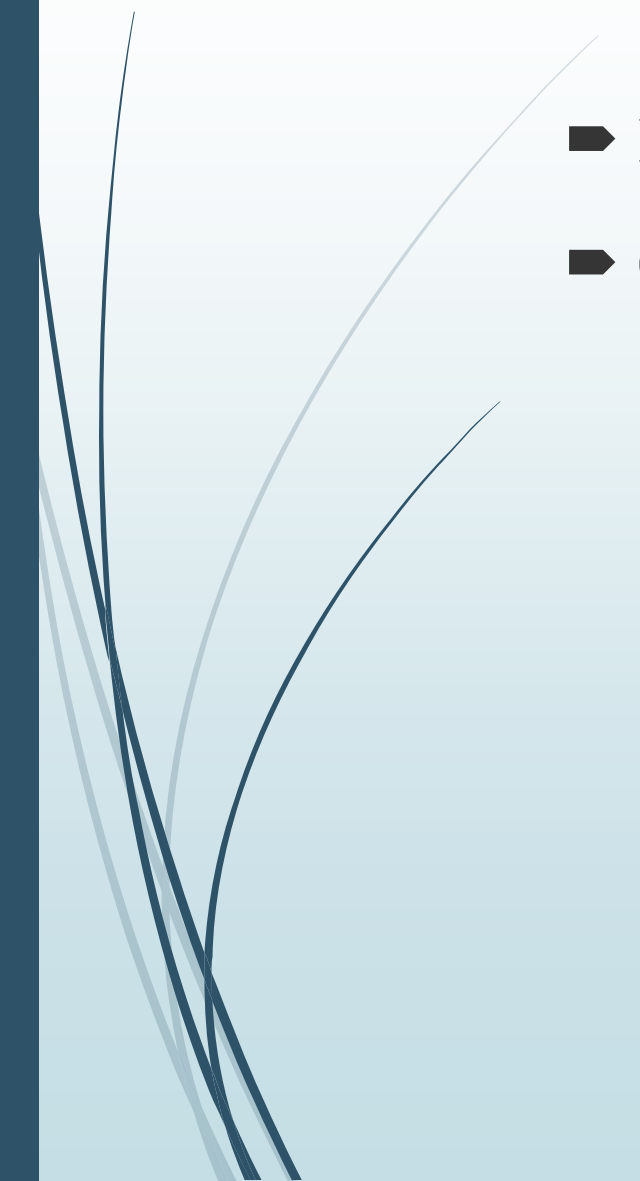
- Help the story to be the story it is, the story the author wants it to be, not the story you want.
- Pay attention to the author's style and themes.
- When in doubt, ask the author.
- Generally, avoid rewriting to “fix” a problem you find.
(Occasional exceptions if you need to explain what you mean.)
- Be prepared to explain your notes—but don't defend them.

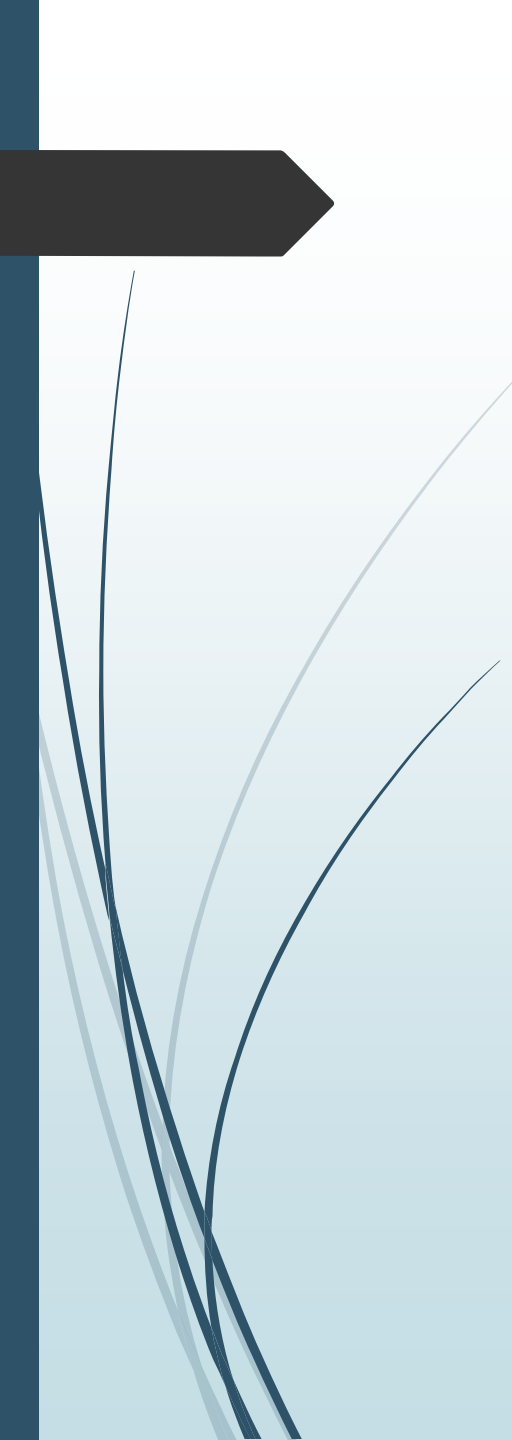


4. Critique partners are useful within
and across genres



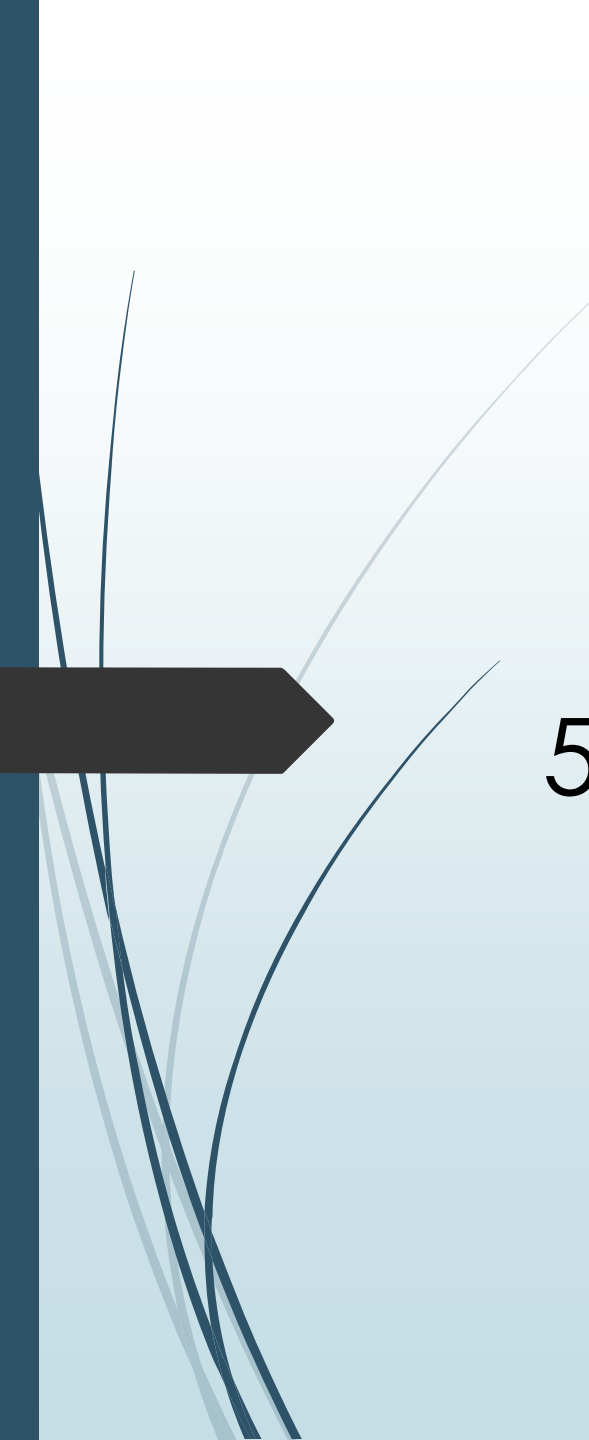
Critiquing inside your genre(s)

- Each genre has tropes and expectations.
 - Original or overdone?
- 



Critiquing outside your genre(s)

- Story is story.
- There may be some things you won't critique.
- Be candid about your level of experience with the genre when you offer yourself as a critique partner.
- Study the genre, though it's not your own. You'll be a better critique partner and a better writer.
(Example: cozy Christmas mystery.)

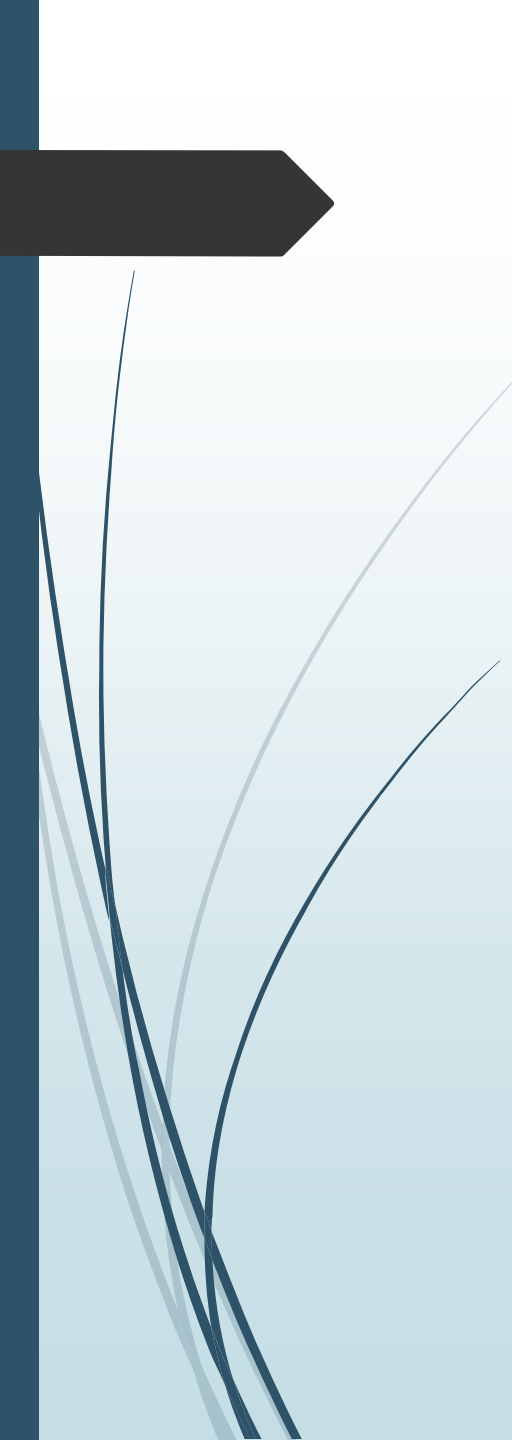


5. You'll read it once or twice.



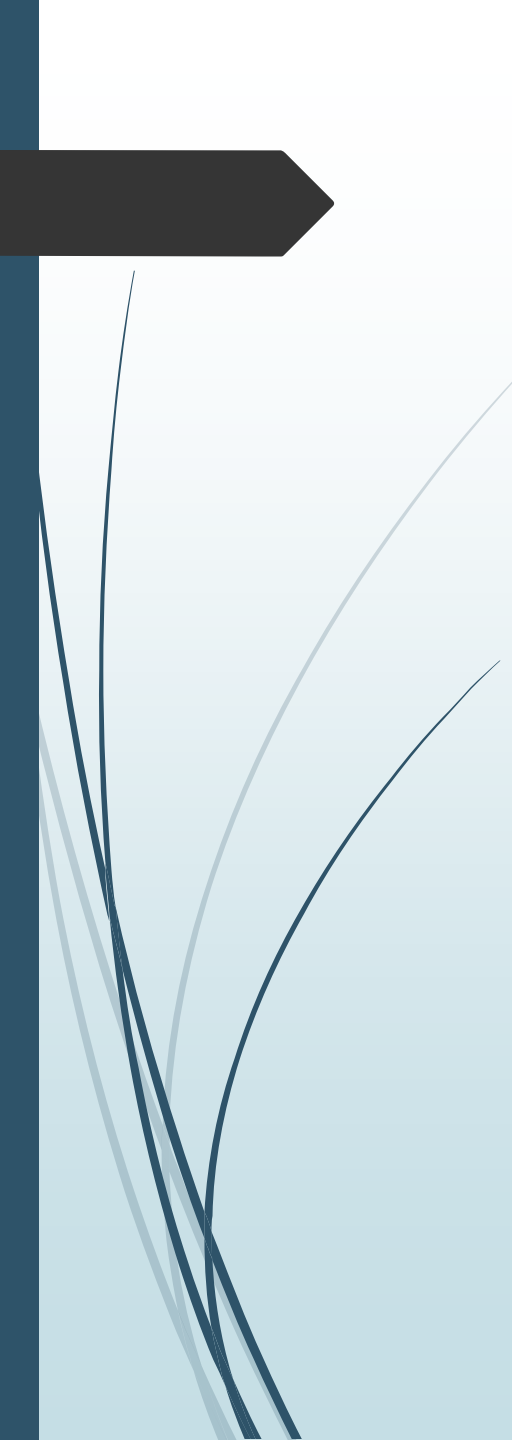
Beta reading

- Finished manuscript (almost final).
- Ordinarily read it only once.
- Focus on the reader's experience.
 - General reader
 - Sensitivity reader
 - Subject matter expert (SME)



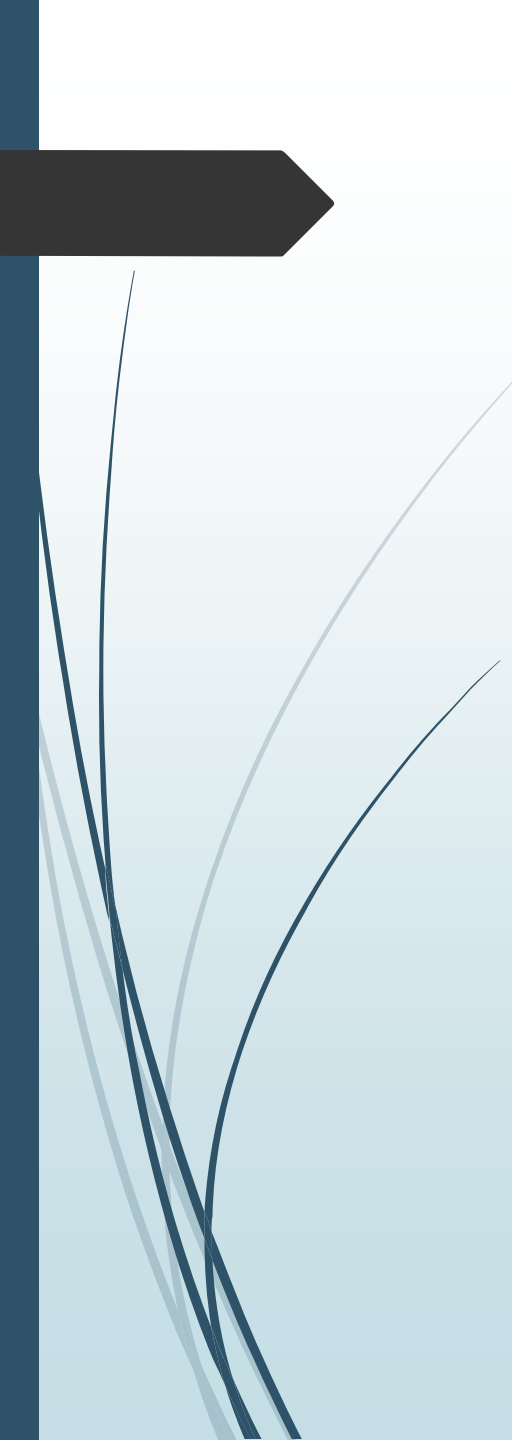
Alpha reading

- Things a developmental editor, subject matter expert, or sensitivity reader might consider.
- Could be an early draft or a late one.
- Might get it a chunk at a time.
- May only read it once.
- Helps to read it twice if you can
 - once as a reader, for effect
 - once as a writer, to consider what's working, not working, and how.



If you read it twice

- **First reading:** Watch yourself reading.
 - What hooks you? How soon? How firmly?
 - What keeps you reading?
 - What bogs you down or bounces you out of the story?
 - How eager are you for the next part?
 - Does the reading experience feel complete at the end?
 - If the author mentioned specific concerns, be sure to consider them.



If you read it twice, cont.

- **Second reading:** Put on your developmental editor cap. What's working? What's not working? Why?

Characters

Pacing

Dialogue

Conflict/potential for conflict

Setting

Stakes

Point of view

Language

Blocking

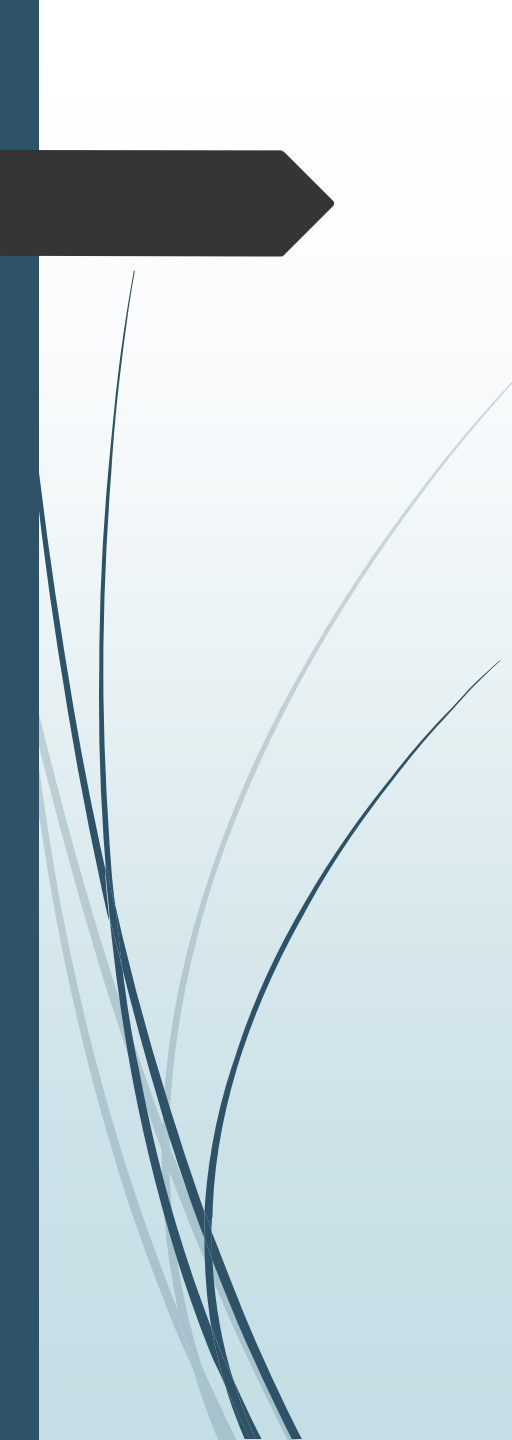
Plausibility

Fits the genre?

Fits the intended audience?

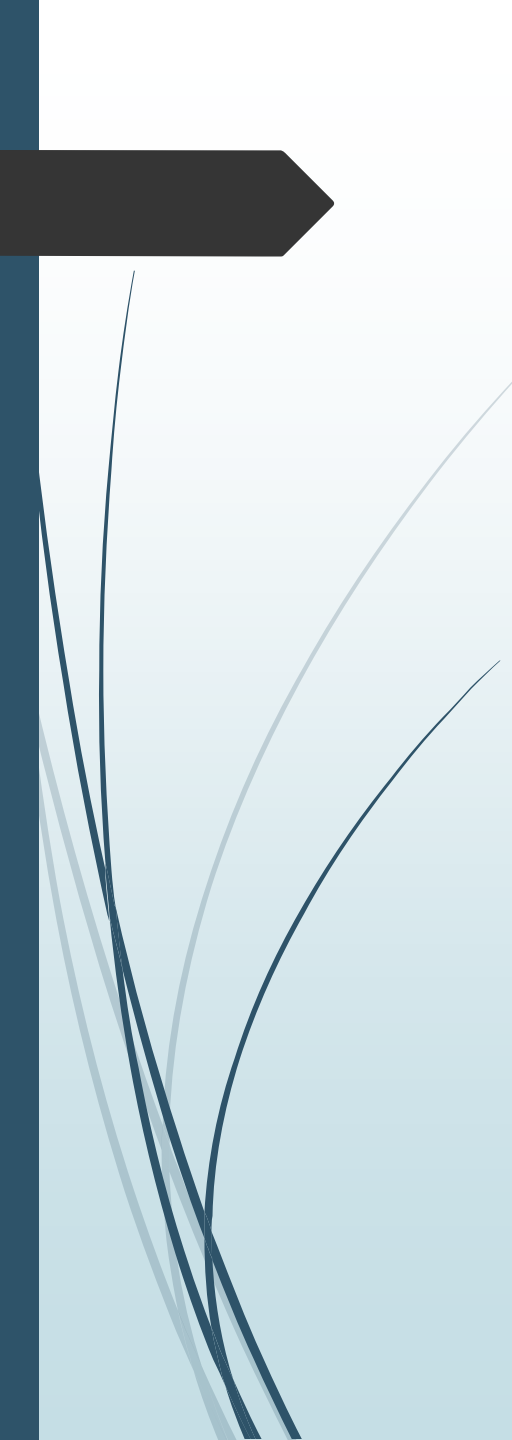


6. Report how you experience
the story



Your experience matters

- What works really well, hooks you, keeps you reading, delights you?
- Which characters draw you in? Which don't?
- What bumps you out of the story? Which are the boring parts?
- Mark your emotional reactions (the key ones, quickly in passing). Just a word or two or an LOL is usually sufficient.
- The later the draft, the more important it is to flag the boring parts.



Your reading experience . . .

- Is this useful critique?

In the margin of a chapter near the end of a novel:

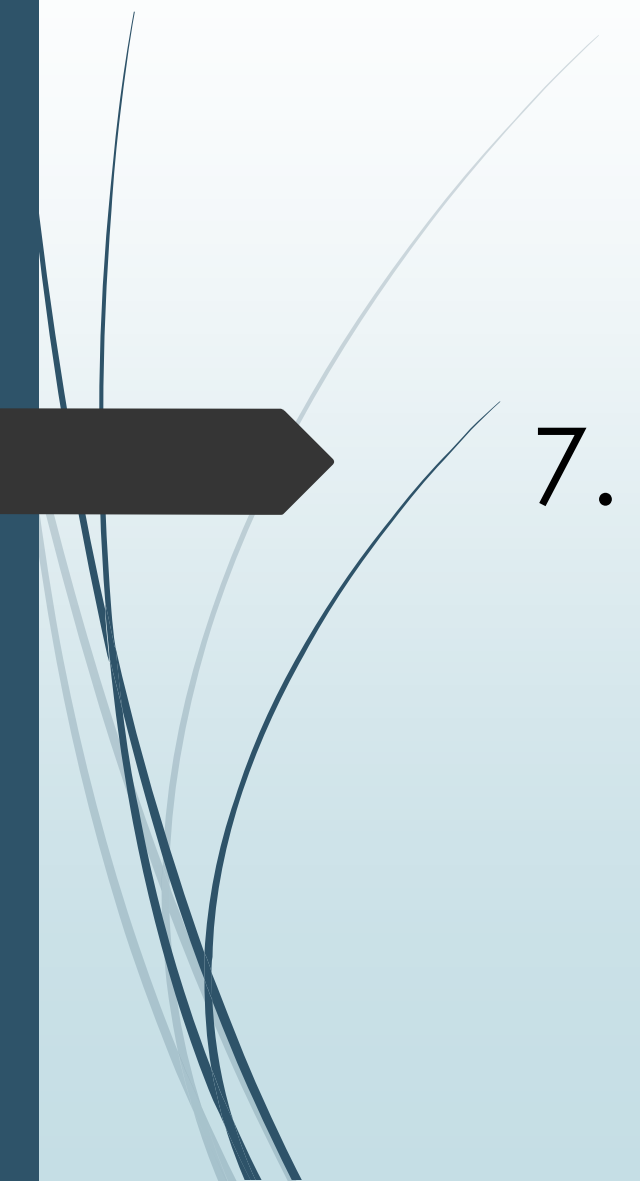
- “I’m crying now.”

- A page or two later: “Now I’m really crying.”

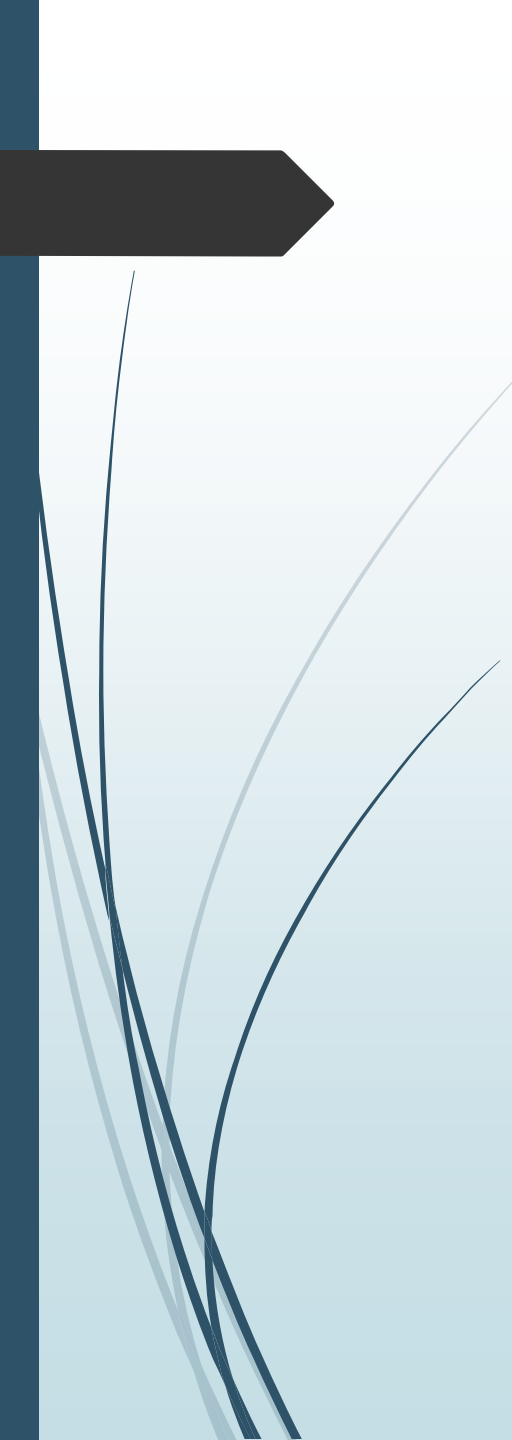
- End of scene: “I can’t stop crying.”

- Is this useful? (overheard at my critique group)

“I love this story. I would read this book. Remember that when you see my notes.”

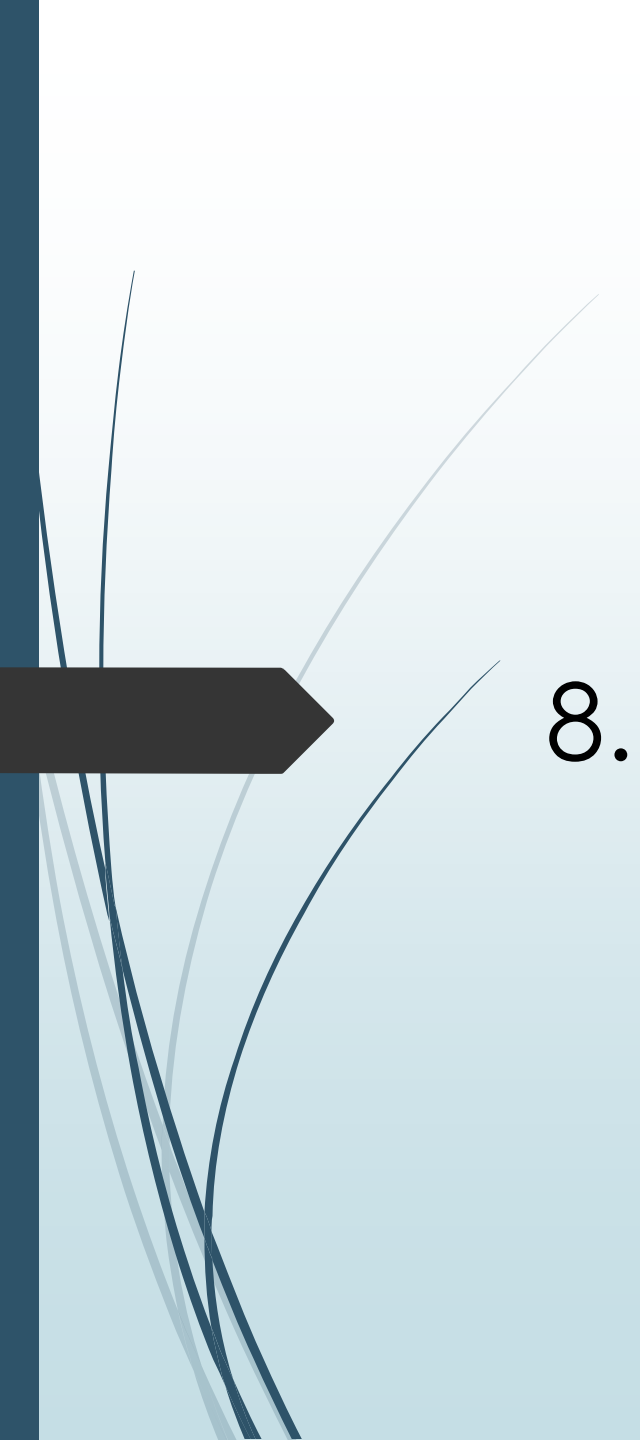


7. Be yourself

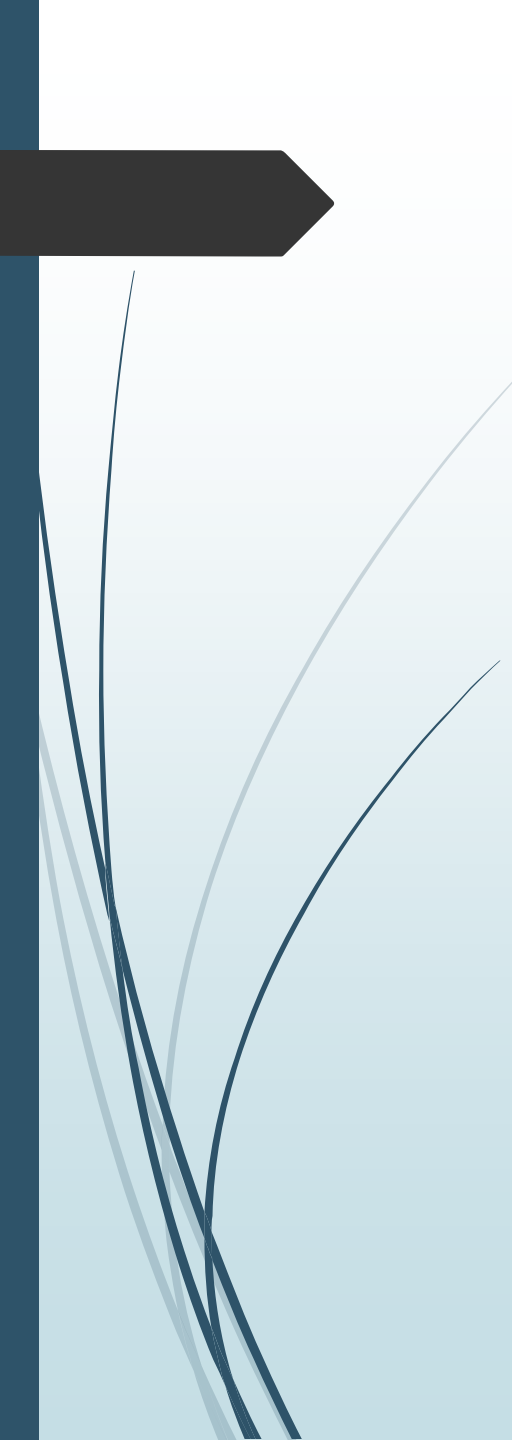


Do what you can do

- There are many aspects of story. Critique what you know (or notice).
- Don't critique genre elements if you don't know the genre.
- Don't try to be a subject-matter expert (SME) if you're not, or a sensitivity reader if you don't have the right background.
- If analyzing and critiquing a certain aspect of story doesn't come easily to you, work at it. Expand your repertoire.
- Don't worry that you can't do everything. Everything is the author's job.
- **Don't don't don't** outsource your critique to AI.

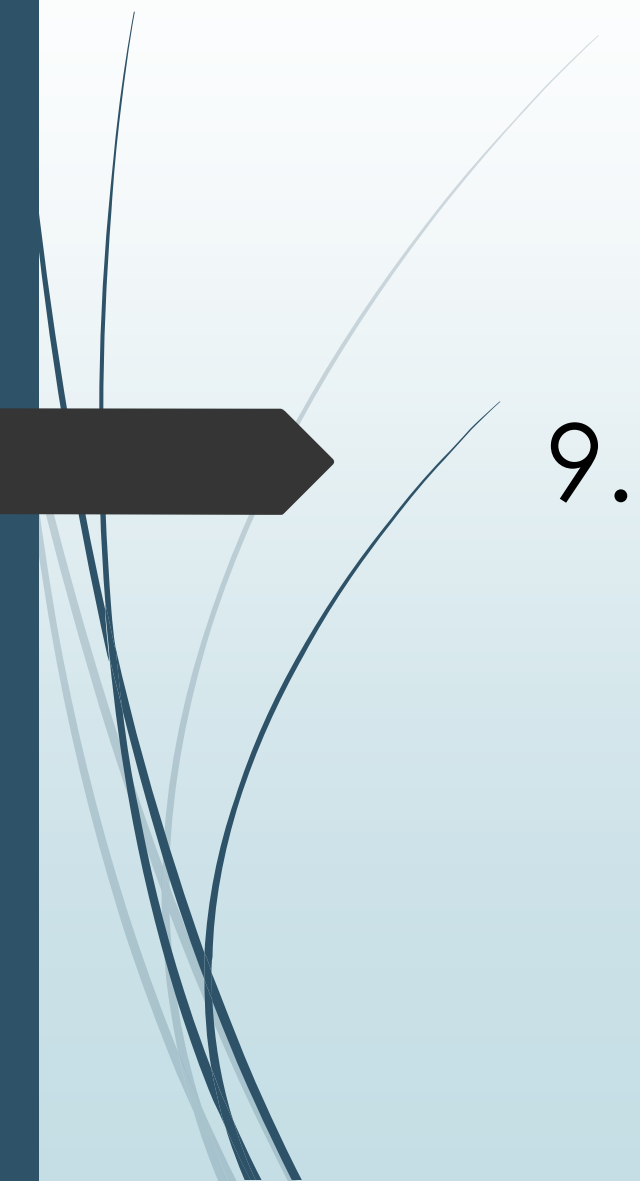


8. Ask the author

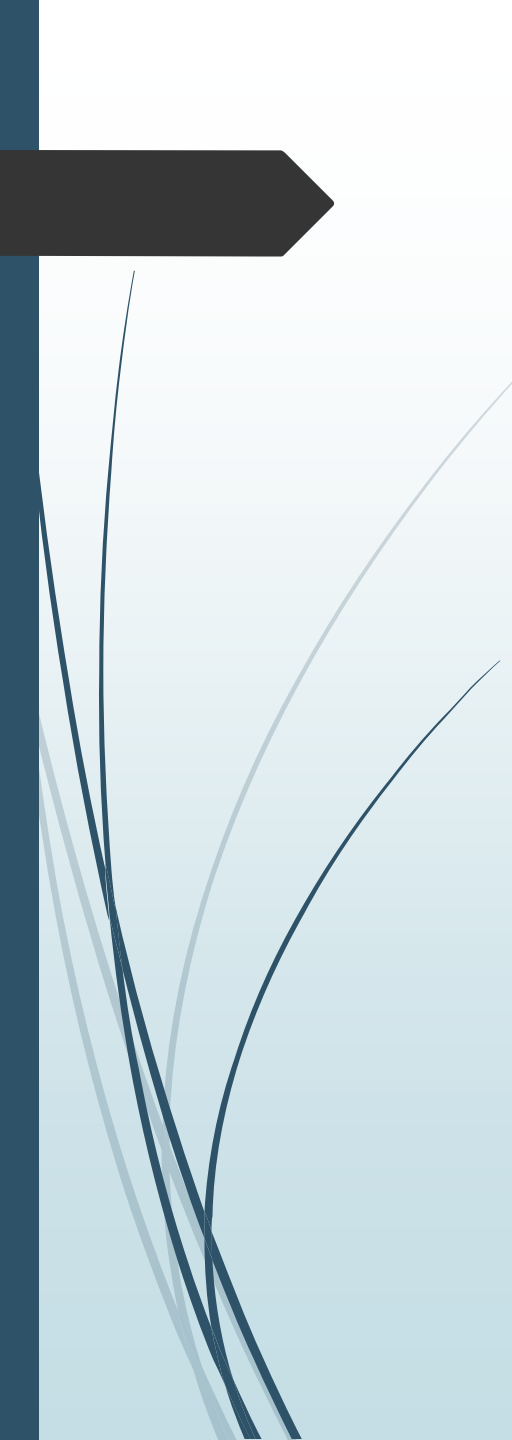


Ask the author (if she doesn't tell you)

- Specific concerns, specific things to focus on?
- When do you need my notes?
- What's the best way to present my critique?
 - Written notes in a document or an e-mail? Markup in a Word doc, a Google doc, a printed manuscript? Conversation over a leisurely lunch? More than one of these?
 - By chapter/section or all at once?
 - Answers to specific questions?



9. Be professional

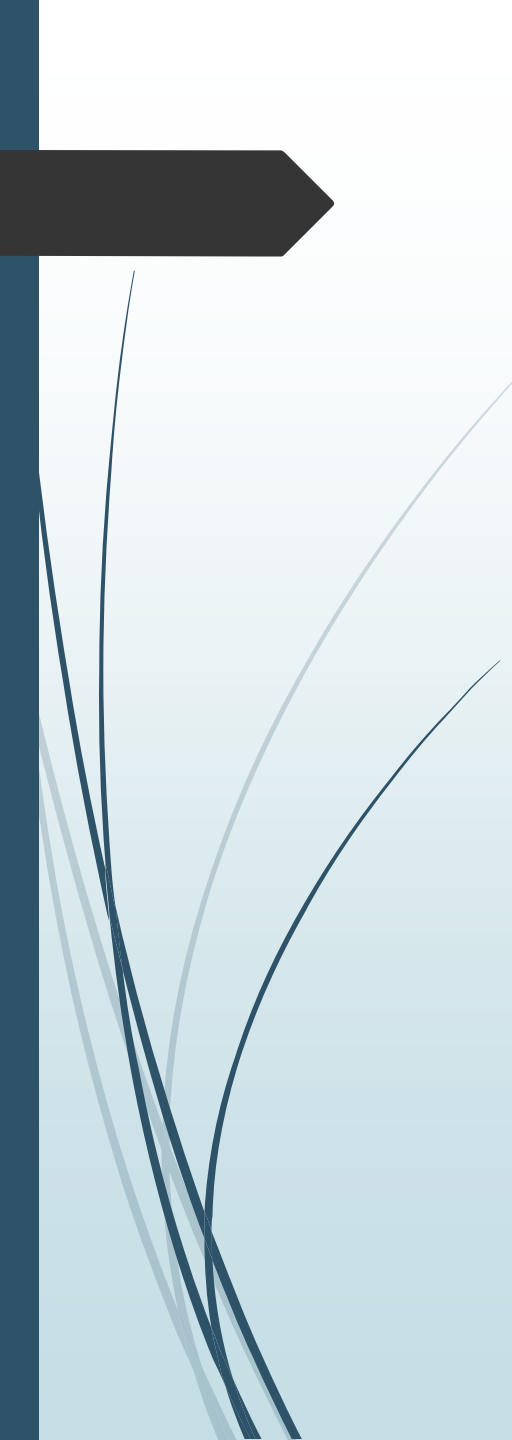


Be professional

- If you realize you're the wrong beta reader, say so.
- If the deadline starts to slip, say so.
- If you have questions, ask.
- It's not unusual for beta readers to flake out (50%). Don't wallow in your guilt. Just communicate.
- Strict confidentiality.



10. When you can, raise your game

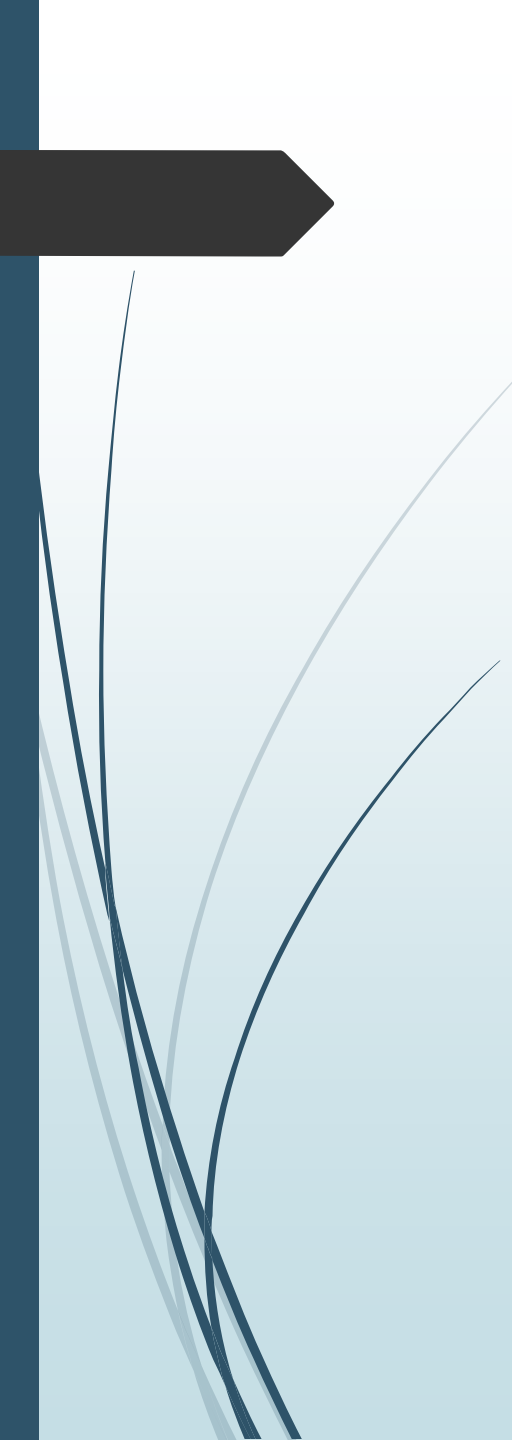


Raise your game

- If it's not your genre, learn. Work at it a little.
 - Ursula LeGuin: "If ... it's not a kind [of book] you're used to, you probably need to learn how to read it. You need to learn the genre."
(*"Genre: A Word Only a Frenchman Could Love,"* in *Words Are My Matter*, p. 11)
 - Regency and I
- I think my sister would enjoy beta-reading this. May I share it?
- Beta-reading after you've alpha-read (or after critique group)
- Report what you're thinking, wondering, suspecting, foreseeing
- If you're beta-reading historical fiction and you wonder about anachronistic words, use Google's Ngram Viewer

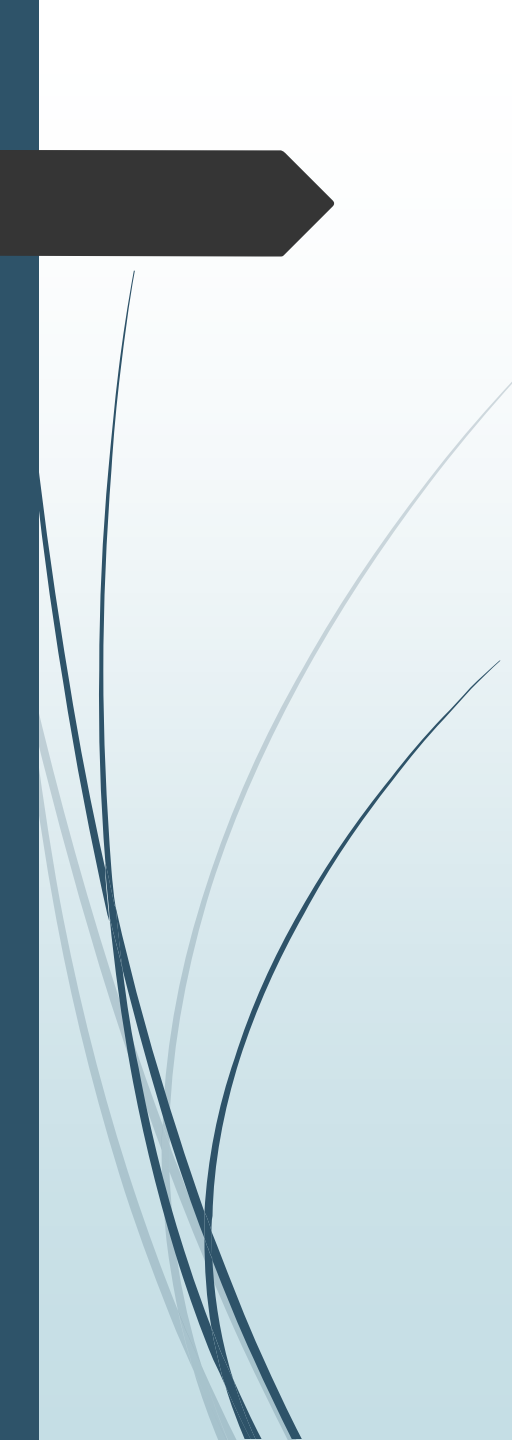


If you feel inadequate to critique



Comfort food

- Giving critique is a scary step into the scary unknown, much like receiving it. It's okay to notice that.
- Positive notes aren't just welcome; they're useful.
- The author is still the author, responsible to identify and keep the wheat and blow away the chaff, including yours.
- You don't have to see everything anyone else sees when they critique. You just have to be you. You are a highly qualified reader and more of a writer than the mass of humanity. The author is lucky to have you (and probably knows it).



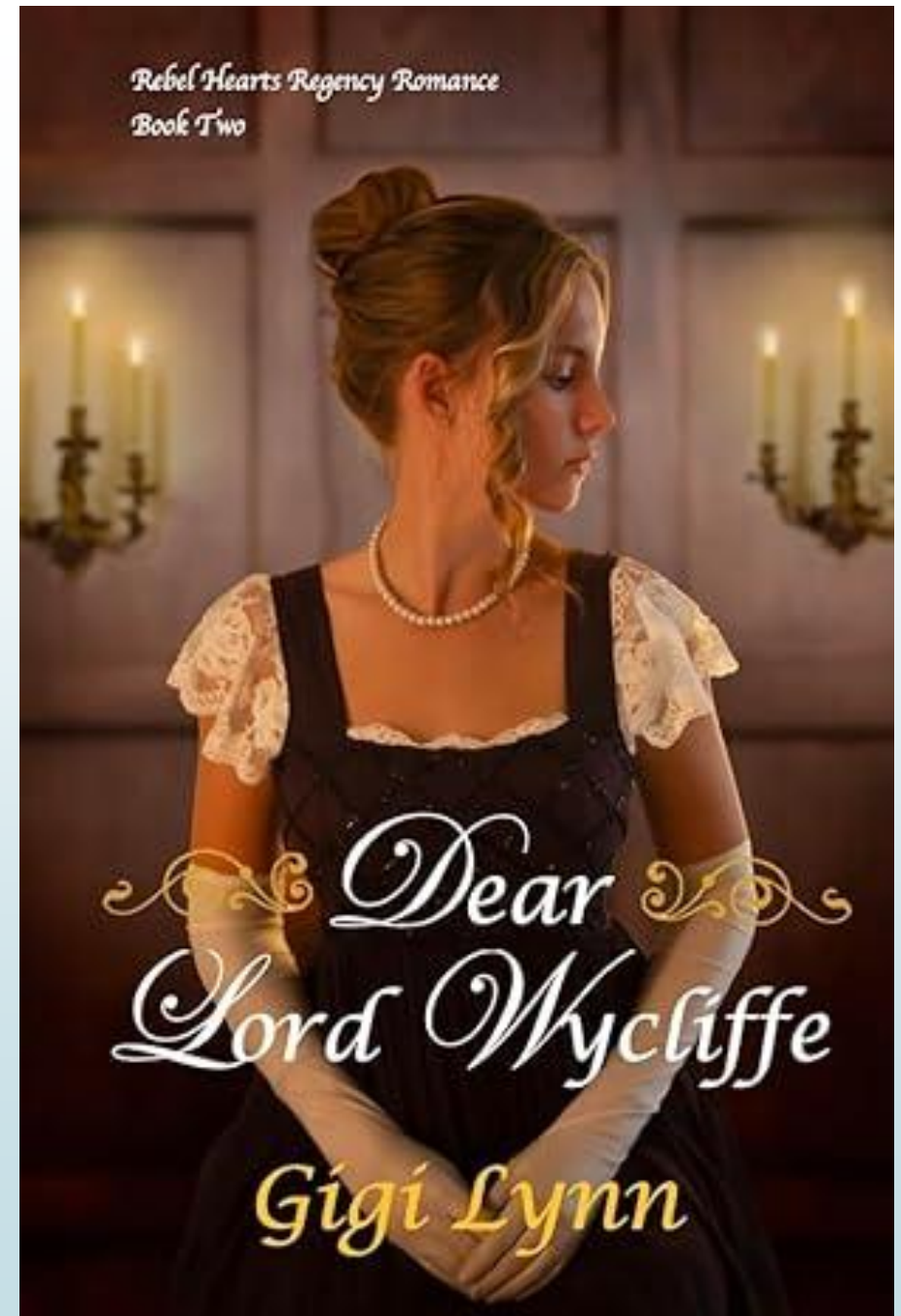
Reality sandwich

- As a critic, you will cause the author pain. You can do it humanely or cruelly (choose humanely), but you can't avoid it.
- You may be tempted to wreak vengeance in kind on a critique partner whose critique causes you pain. (Don't.)
- Later, you may realize what you missed and what you got wrong in your critique. Life goes on. And the author is still the author.



From the trenches

A variety of my
comments
on a Regency epistolary
romance by Gigi Lynn



These are bumps.

discovered before I pulled to the side of the road and climbed out my car.

After tying Brownie to the Hawthorne hedge, I made my way back and watched from the shadows of the verge. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but from the rolling gate of the other two men, I could tell that they were sailors.



David Rodeback

To this point, we know only that she has seen M. Hugo. We know nothing of these sailors.

in the Holy Roman Empress Maria Theresa in particular.”

Rupert told him no such thing, since my brother doesn't know the focus of my study.

I scowled but Lord Wycliffe darted a glance behind me and continued. “Since I briefly met



David Rodeback

I thought this came up in the initial reveal.

To: Cora
32 Portman Square
Sandgate, Kent



David Rodeback

Shouldn't this be London?

stalking prey than a bored gentleman doing his duty. I think—

No, I'm not going to think of him anymore.



David Rodeback

Perhaps: No, I will think of him no more. (As written, sounds too modern to my ear.)

Things that work well for me

My dearest friend,

The days of adventure are over. Romance is dead. We were not waylaid by a highwayman on our way to London.



David Rodeback
I still love this beginning.

But then Mrs. Belsing came up and put her hand on his arm. You may not know of her. She is the widow of General Belsing, who is a much-celebrated veteran of the American wars.

Since that whole situation ended so poorly for England, I don't know why he is so well thought of. However, that has nothing to do with last night's ball where Mrs. Belsing smiled up at Lord Wycliffe with such adoration in her eyes. Then she leaned forward far enough that the whole of her late husband's company could have conducted maneuvers in the décolletage of her gown.



David Rodeback
LOL. Not kidding.



David Rodeback
Yeah, LOL here too.

Perhaps after this conflict ceases, we should tour the grand cities of the continent. You could bring your wife, perhaps your son as well. I've been thinking that I need to follow your example and start a family of my own. For me this is a sudden and unexpected impulse, even if I am nearly four and thirty. My desire to serve my country and to see the world has always in the past



David Rodeback
Well timed and nicely played in passing.

Things that work well for me

Dear Georgie,

Lord Sutton came to call yesterday. My comments at Lady Carlyle's supper last week seem to have inspired him to a burst of careless research and a flurry of underdeveloped thought. He came prepared with new and to his mind stronger arguments in his defense



David Rodeback
Love it.

suck up in clumps.

And his clothes, you could not miss him in a crowd, they are so bright, and they seldom match. One day he wore a scarlet waistcoat with a lavender coat. I was almost blinded.



David Rodeback
LOL

A smorgasbord



David Rodeback

It's not clear to me what help she's requesting. Is that intentional?



David Rodeback

Lost me. Who was it?



David Rodeback

Where is he? To her right or her left?



David Rodeback

This crucial scene is well crafted.



David Rodeback

The bear episode is clever, unexpected, and a nice little diversion, duly connected to the story by impeding her mission.



David Rodeback

Nice job making me wonder if he is the vicomte or isn't. Georgie was indiscreet, I think, and I wonder if it will poses problems later.



David Rodeback

I was worried a little about pacing, given where we are in the book and the pace at which things are developing, but this is well placed and I'm no longer worried.

A smorgasbord (cont.)



David Rodeback

I had lost track of the fact that she writes fiction.
Perhaps that means a reminder or two would have
been in order.



David Rodeback

Word choice – old meaning? – in the modern
meaning the next clause contradicts it.



David Rodeback

I like how she is oblivious to his interest in her, even
if the reader grows suspicious of it.



David Rodeback

I'm reading this in the late evening, and I am happy
(for your sake) to report it sufficiently engaging that I
want ... to read ... just ... one ... more ... letter ...

Or maybe two. Or three.



David Rodeback

Good time for this development, I think.



David Rodeback

Tee hee.

What I'm thinking as a reader

has already begun establishing a new organization and is working with a group of local smugglers willing to transport French goods with discretion. Additionally, he has already managed to find a place to store the contraband until it can be suitably distributed.



David Rodeback

A certain cellar, perhaps?

a different light. I have put off certain responsibilities, thinking I had all the time in the world. Now I find I those very things I have avoided have grown in importance to me. I hope to live long enough to make changes.



David Rodeback

Good potential.

nd myself differently because of them. They are unrequited, but they are mine, and
il. My love may never bear the fruit I wish. In time it will wither and die, but for now,



David Rodeback

First use of this word?

What I'm thinking as a reader (cont)



David Rodeback

And I'm thinking, what could possibly go wrong? ☐



David Rodeback

Aha. I think I know who this man is.



David Rodeback

Yeah, this could go badly . . .



David Rodeback

Okay, she's totally smitten now. Increases the tension!



David Rodeback

The thought had crossed my mind.

Google Books Ngram Viewer

male bonding

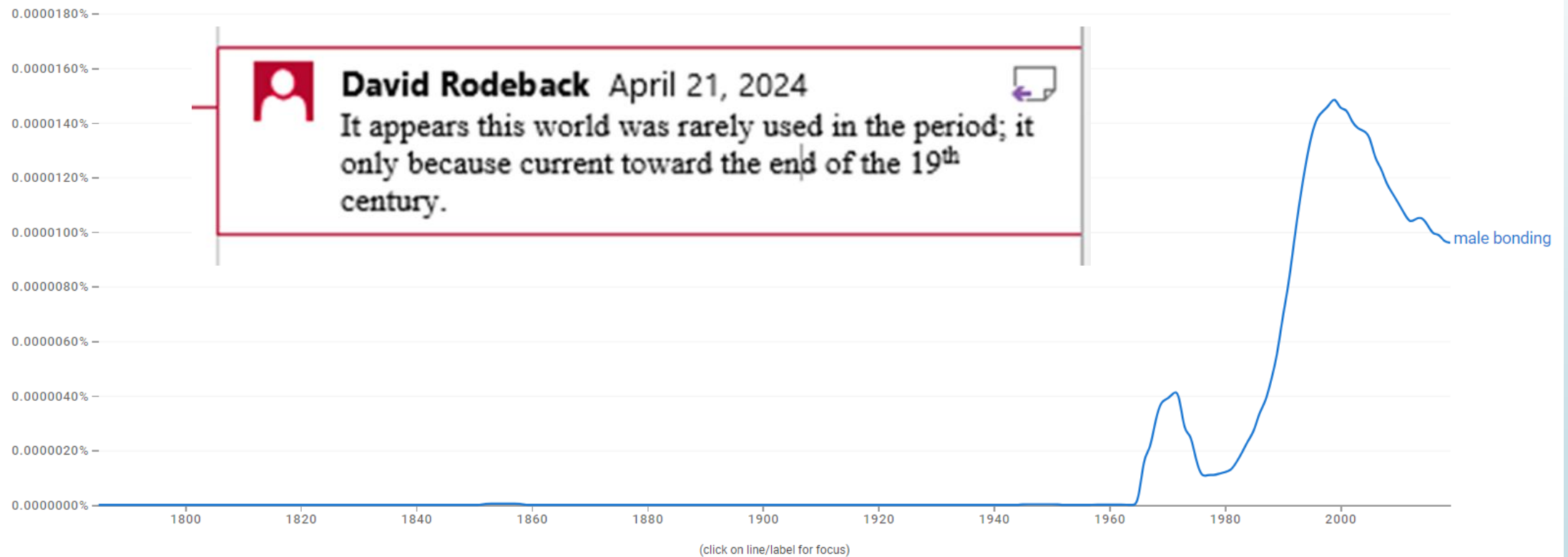


1785 - 2019

British English (2019)

Case-Insensitive

Smoothing



Google Books Ngram Viewer

procrastination,larceny,surgeon

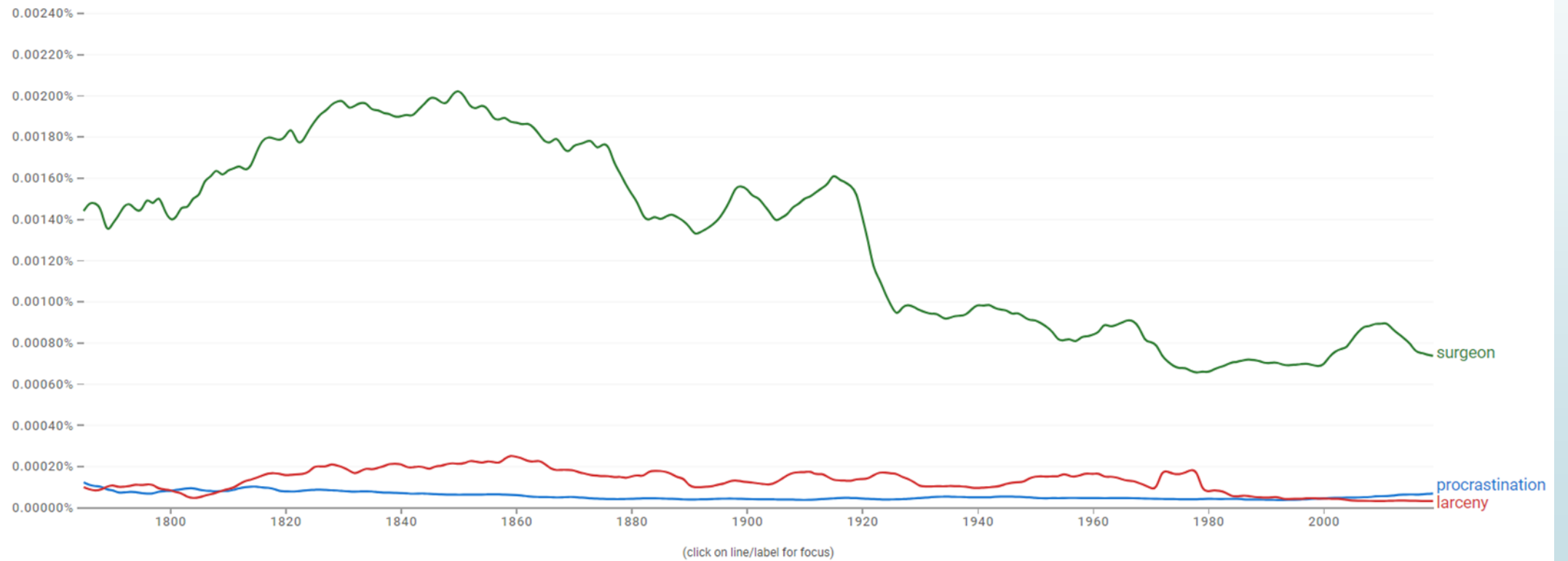


1785 - 2019

British English (2019)

Case-Insensitive

Smoothing





Maybe this is encouragement?

Ann Patchett



Imagine running over a butterfly with an SUV. Everything that was beautiful about this living thing—all the color, the light and movement—is gone. What I'm left with is the dry husk of my friend, the broken body chipped, dismantled, and poorly reassembled. Dead. That's my book.

“The Getaway Car: A Practical Memoir About Writing and Life”

THIS IS
THE
STORY
OF A
HAPPY
MARRIAGE

ann patchett

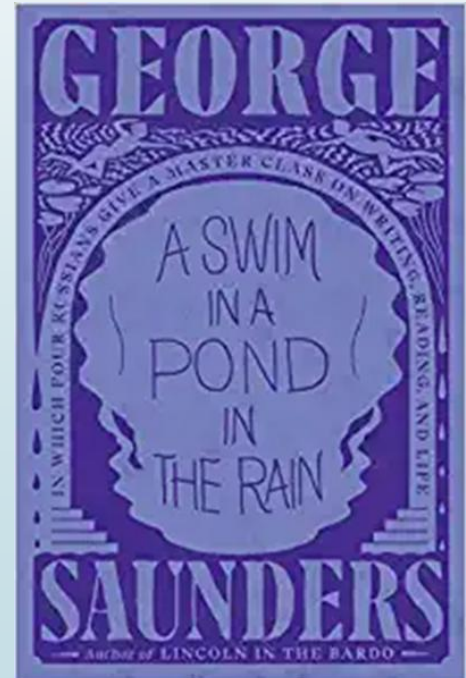
George Saunders

To write a story that works, that moves the reader, is difficult, and most of us can't do it. Even among those who have done it, it mostly can't be done. . . . There's intuition involved, and stretching—trying things that are at the limit of our abilities, that may cause mistakes.

. . . It's hard to get any beauty at all into a story. If and when we do, it might not be the type of beauty we've always dreamed of making. But we have to take whatever beauty we can get, however we can get it.

That's the kind of story I want to write, the kind that stops being writing and starts being life.

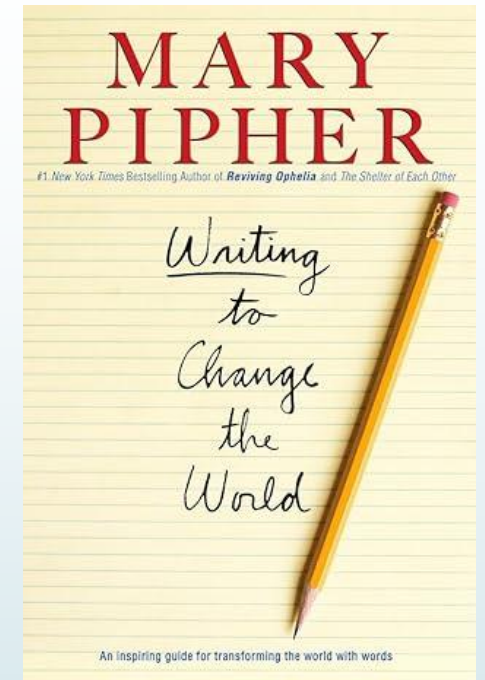
But, Lord, it's harder than it looks.



Mary Pipher

I am not interested in weapons, whether words or guns. I want to be part of the rescue team. . . . The rescuers will be those people who help other people to think clearly, and to be honest and open-minded. They will be an antidote to those people who disconnect us. They will de-objectify, re-humanize, and make others more understandable and sympathetic. (p. 5)

Any form of writing can change the world. Your goal is to find the form that allows you to use every one of your talents in the service of what you consider to be your most important goals. You want to search for what you alone can say and then how you can say it most effectively. (p. 27)



Critique helps to change the world too

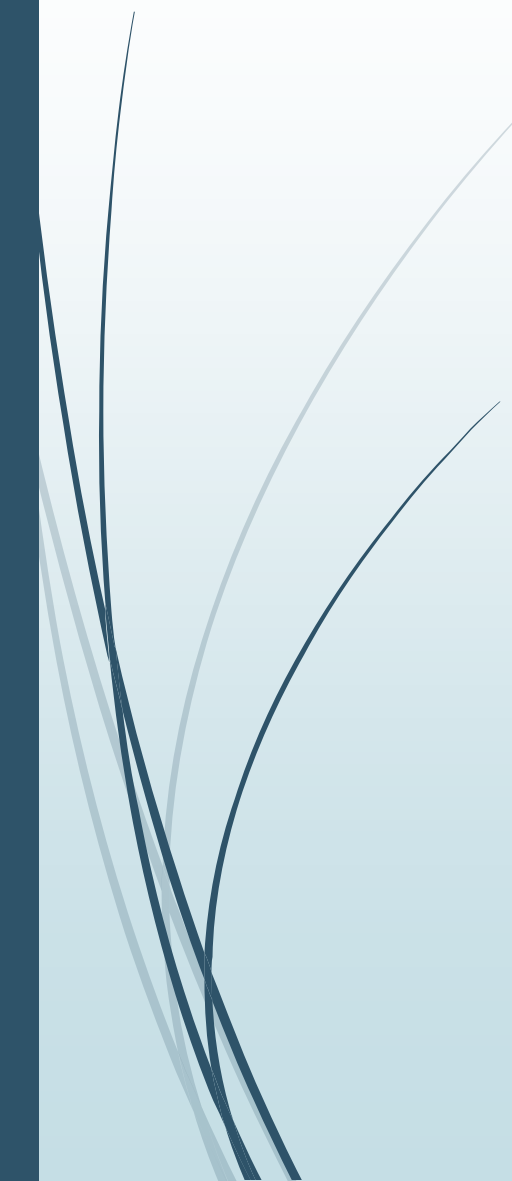


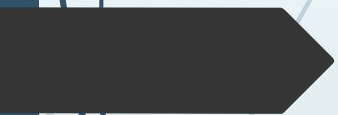


Now it's your turn



Questions for you

- What would you like to add? (What did I miss or get wrong?)
 - What's your best war story (as author or critic)?
 - How much do you appreciate your critique partners?
- 



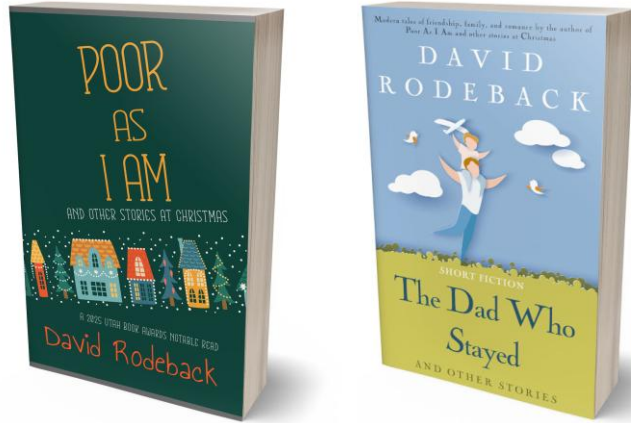
~~Q&A~~ ASK ME **ANYTHING**



Thank you!

Where to find me and my books*

*besides tonight's author signing and book sale

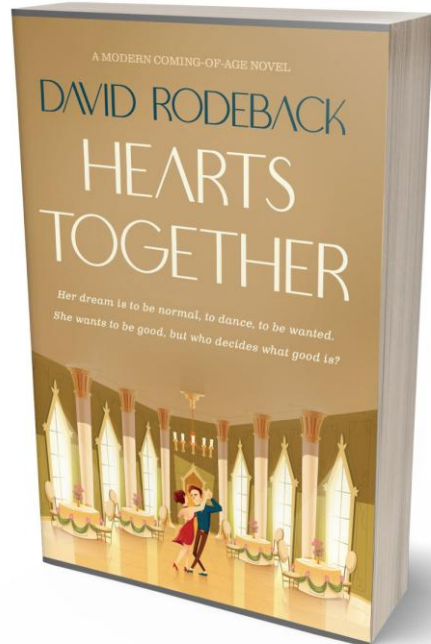


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