

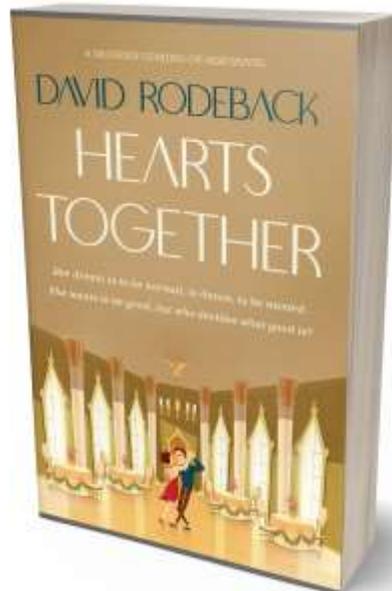
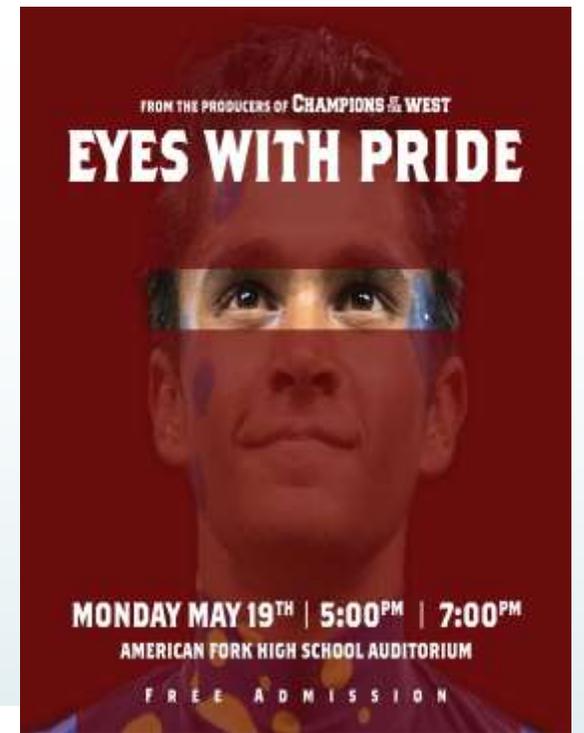
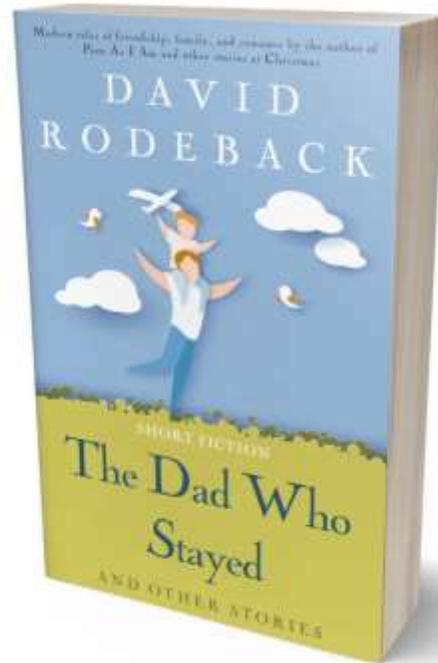
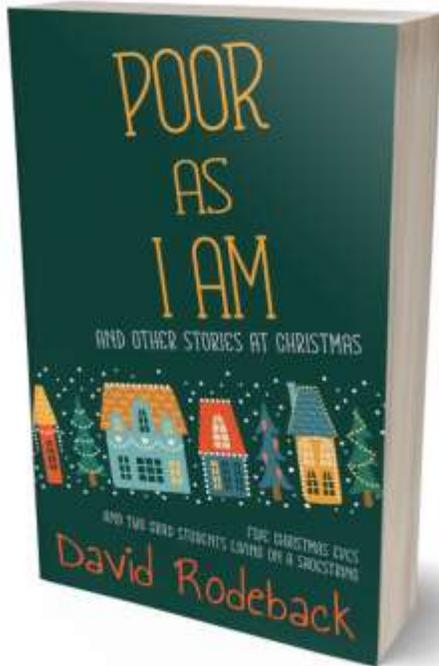


Being a Good Critique Partner

David Rodeback

Romantic Letters Conference—March 2026

- 
- Husband of one, parent of four, grandparent of two, uncle of 18
 - CMTO of a West Valley City manufacturing firm, where I write stuff: C#.Net code, SQL queries, marketing copy, video scripts, company policies, etc.
 - In a former life taught writing, Russian language, and Russian literature at BYU, Cornell, and elsewhere.
 - Two award-winning collections of short fiction in print
 - One novel, plus assorted short stories published here and there
 - Monthly newspaper column on books, bookstores, libraries, etc.
 - 2025 LUW Writer of the Year



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OPINION

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By AF Citizen

OPINION

OPINION: Poke the algorithms in the eye: Read books in 2025

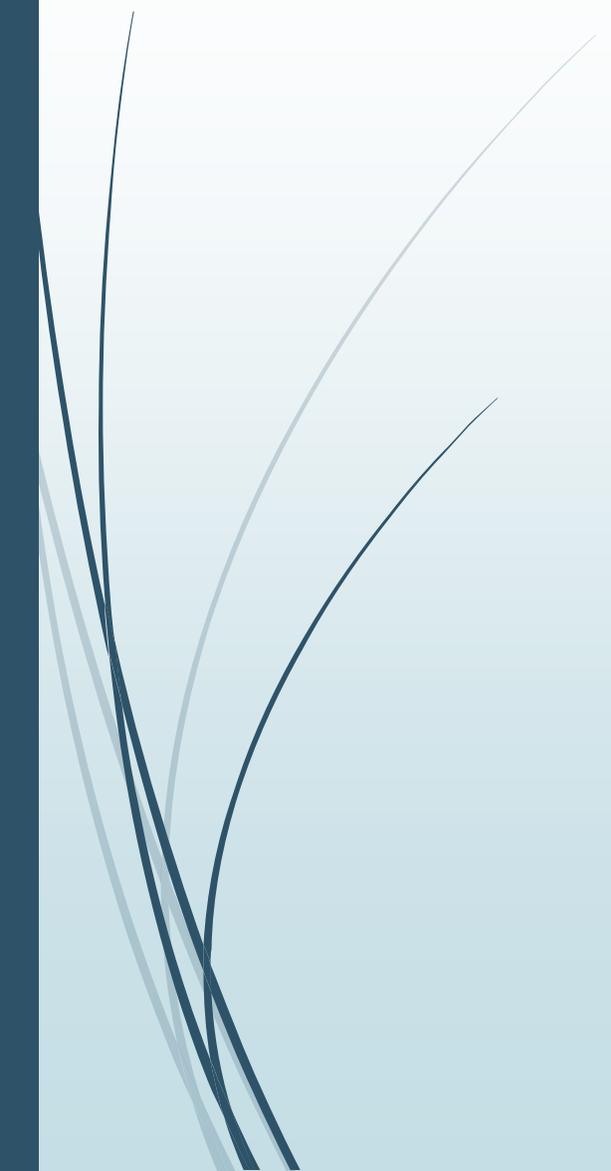
Published 7 months ago on January 12, 2025

OPINION

COLUMN: "The Lusty Month of May"

Published 3 months ago on May 19, 2025
By AF Citizen







Assumptions & disclaimers

- ▶ You have insights and experience I don't have on this topic. Therefore:
 - ▶ Discussion is **in**.
 - ▶ The presenter may be **wrong**. (Always a possibility, of course.)
 - ▶ Captain Obvious is alive and well.
- ▶ We'll speak in generalities, but ...
 - ▶ Every writer is different.
 - ▶ Every story is different.
 - ▶ Every critic is different.
- ▶ How to find critique partners is beyond the scope of this presentation, but worth discussing.



Definitions

- **Alpha reader:** Reads an early draft, looking for major issues, including plot, character, and thematic problems
- **Beta reader:** 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
- **Critique partner:** self-evident; relationship is reciprocal, may be long-term
- **Critique group:** a lot like a critique partner, only more crowded

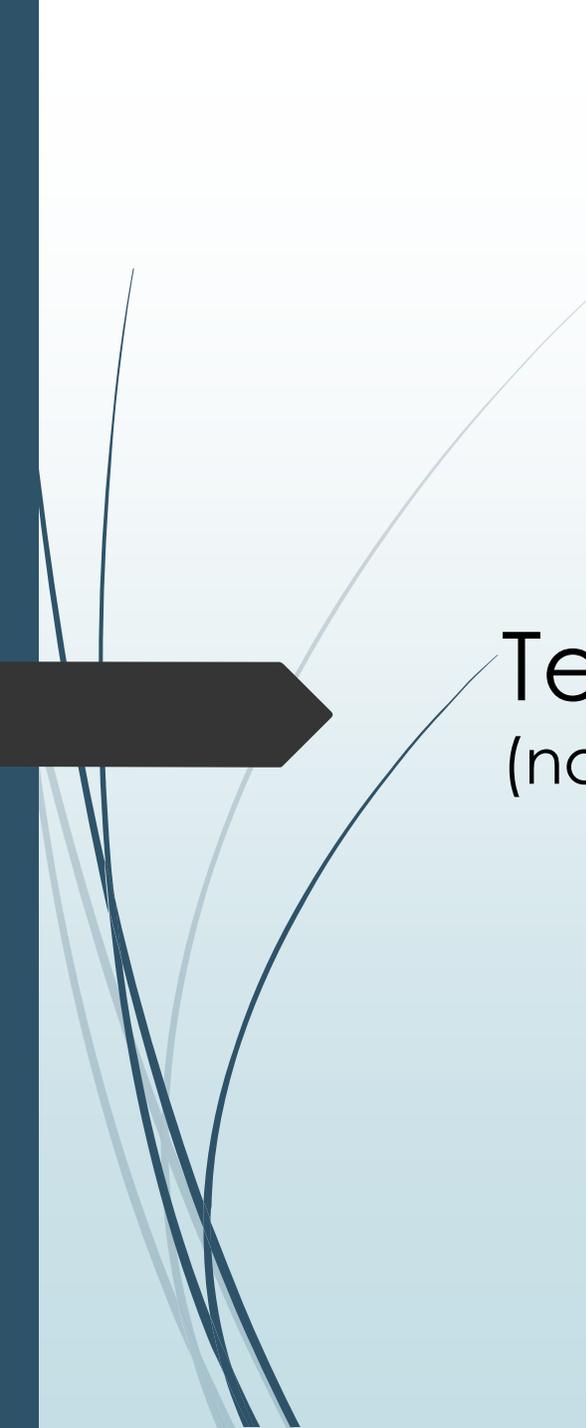


Why?

- ▶ Because other writers need good critique*
 - ▶ I am not my target reader.
 - ▶ What's working? What's not?
 - ▶ Common in my critique: ask for feedback on particular concerns.
- ▶ It makes you a better writer

* When I judge for contests . . .

(And I'm not even an agent or an editor.)



Ten thoughts

(not carved in stone and reprinted in the Old Testament)



1. Critique partners are important



(Tell us why.)



2. Only candor is useful



Candor

- Only candor is useful.
- Reporting what works well is important, not just for morale.
- Stir in your people skills. If you find out you've damaged the relationship, fix it.
- “If you prick us, do we not bleed?” Critique the writing, not the person.

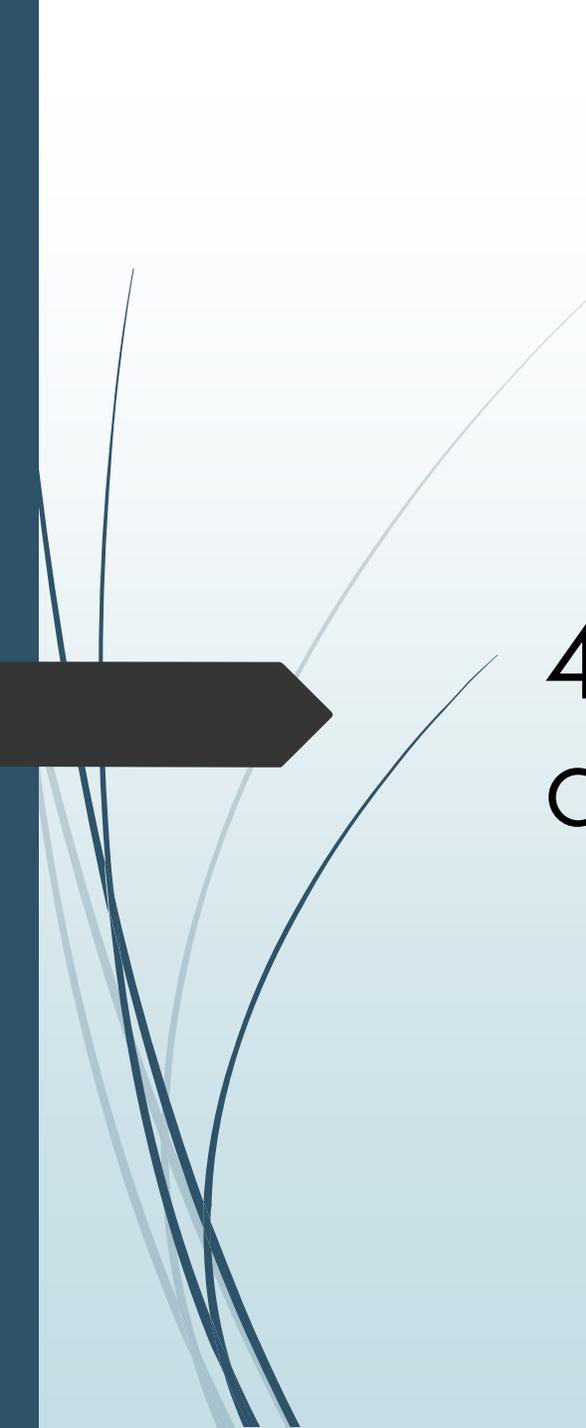


3. The author is the author

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The author is the author

- ▶ Help the story to be the story it is, 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.

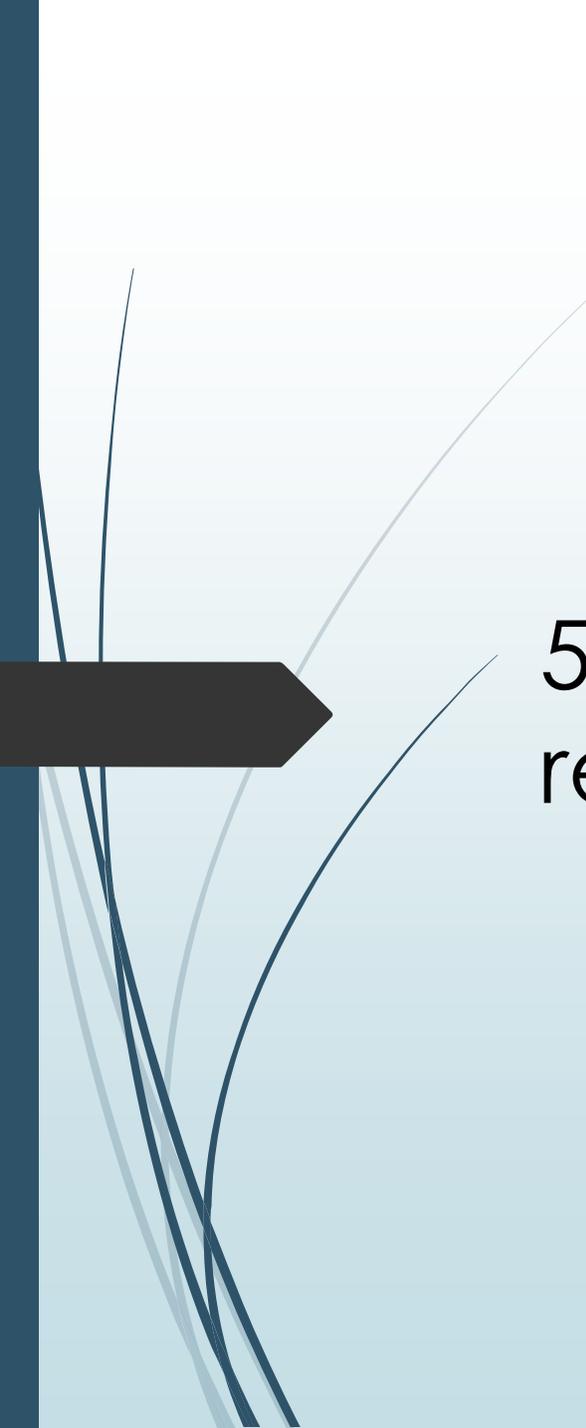


4. Critique partners are useful within
and across genres

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Critiquing in and outside your genre

- Each genre has tropes and expectations; it's helpful to have a critique partner who knows the genre.
- Story is story, though different genres highlight different aspects of story. Critique partners from outside the genre are useful too.
- If it's not your genre, there may be some things you won't critique.
- Be candid about your experience or inexperience 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. Two personal examples:
 - Regency romance
 - Cozy (Christmas) mystery



5. You'll read it only once, unless you read it twice.



Once or twice

Beta reading

- ▶ Finished manuscript (almost final).
- ▶ Looking at the reader's experience (or sometimes a sensitivity reader or SME).
- ▶ Ordinarily read it only once.

Alpha reading

- ▶ Things a developmental editor, subject matter expert, or sensitivity reader might consider.
- ▶ Could be an early draft or a later one.
- ▶ Might get it a chunk at a time.
- ▶ May only read it once.
- ▶ Helps to read it twice if you can



If you read it twice

- **First reading:** Watch yourself reading. (More later.)
- **Second reading:** Put on your developmental editor cap. What's working?

What's not working? Why?

- Characters
- Dialogue
- Setting
- Point of view
- Blocking
- Pacing
- Conflict and potential for conflict
- Language
- Plausibility
- Does it fit the genre and the intended audience?



6. Report your experience of the story to the writer

A dark grey arrow points to the right at the top left. Below it, several thin, curved lines in shades of blue and grey sweep across the left side of the slide.

Your experience matters

- What hooks you? How soon? How firmly?
- What works well, 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? The later the draft, the more important it is to flag the boring parts.
- Mark your emotional reactions (the key ones, quickly in passing). Just a word or two or an LOL is usually sufficient.
- 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.

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Your reading experience . . .

- Consider the value of this from one of my critique partners:

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

- *“I’m crying now.”*

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

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



7. Be yourself

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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. Doing everything is the author's job.



8. Ask the author



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

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



9. Be professional

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Be professional

- If you realize you're the wrong beta reader, say so.
- If the deadline starts to slip, report it sooner, not later.
- 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

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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).



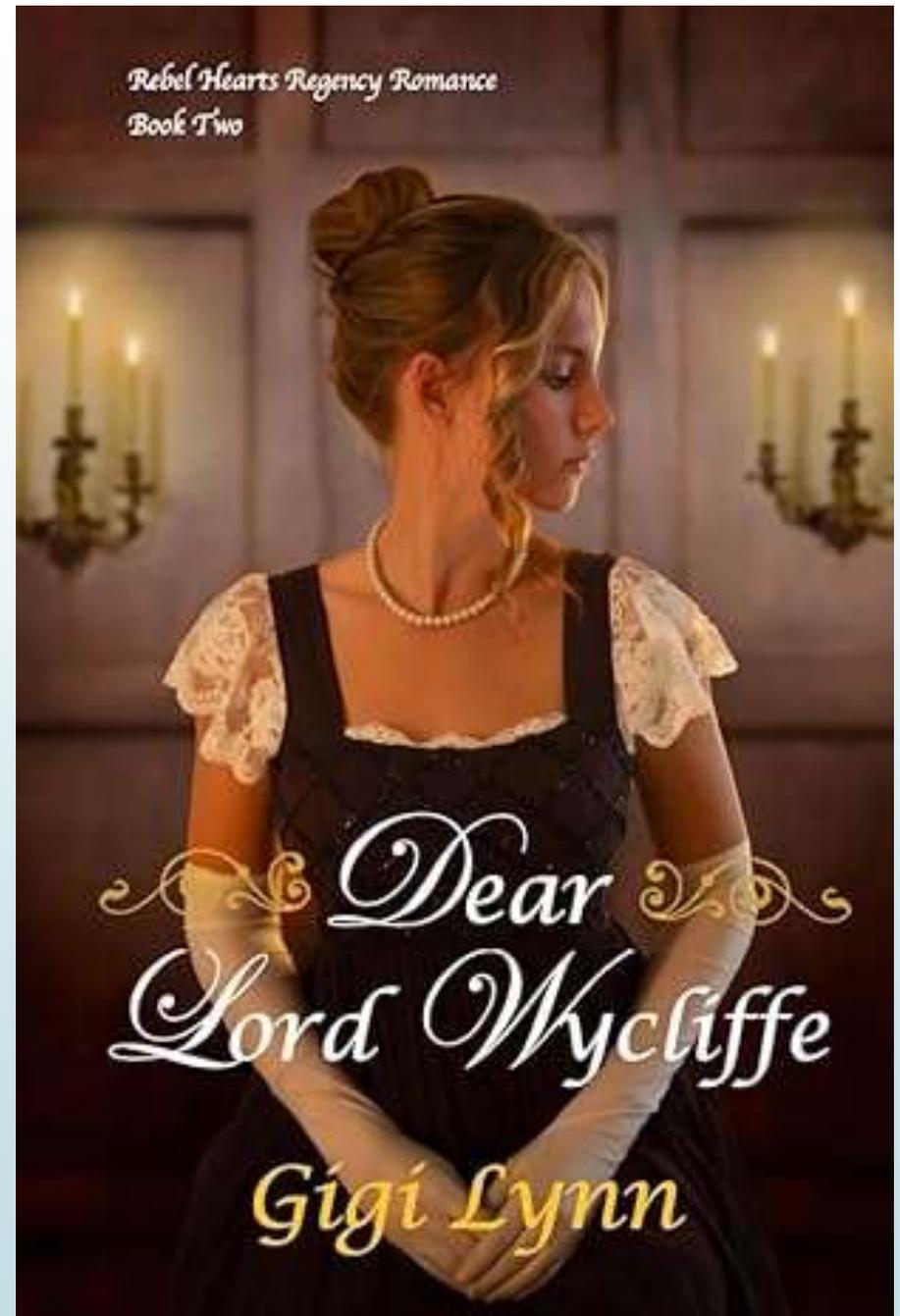
Reality sandwich

- ▶ 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. The author is 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 on 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 Wyoliffa 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

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.

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 crumps.

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**

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**

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 pose problems later.

**David Rodeback**

Good time for this development, I think.

**David Rodeback**

Tee hee.

**David Rodeback**

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

**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.

**David Rodeback**

This crucial scene is well crafted.

**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.

What I'm thinking as a reader

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.

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 I. 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?

 **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!

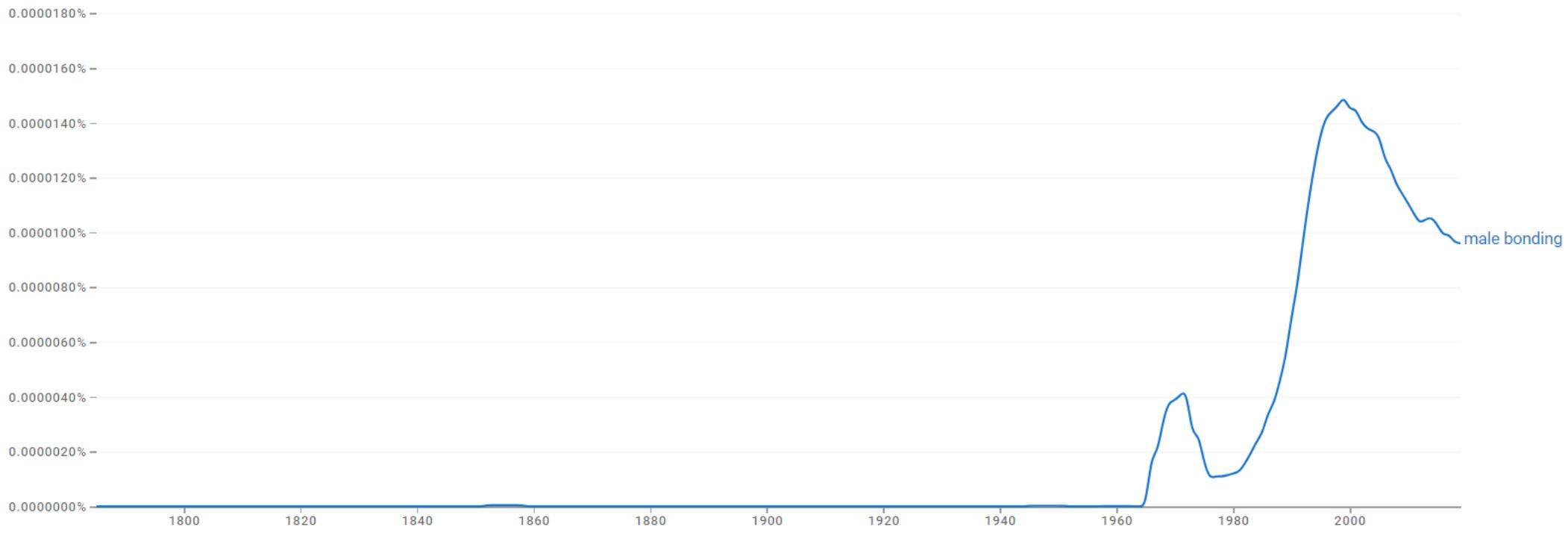
 **David Rodeback**
The thought had crossed my mind.

 **David Rodeback** April 21, 2024 
It appears this world was rarely used in the period; it only became current toward the end of the 19th century.

Google Books Ngram Viewer

male bonding

1785 - 2019 British English (2019) Case-Insensitive Smoothing



(click on line/label for focus)

Google Books Ngram Viewer

procrastination,larceny,surgeon

1785 - 2019 British English (2019) Case-Insensitive Smoothing



(click on line/label for focus)



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

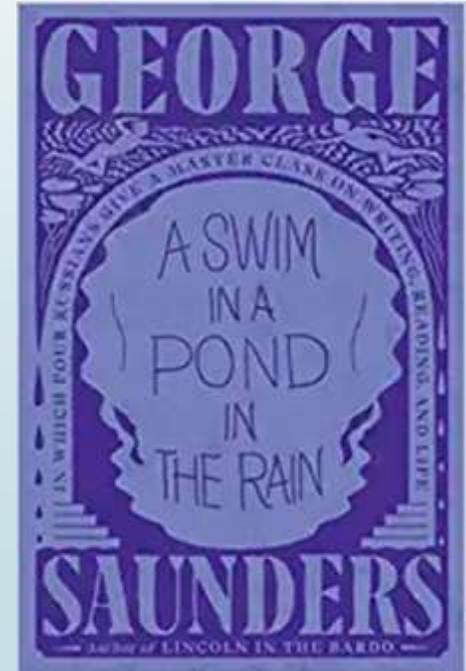
George Saunders

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.

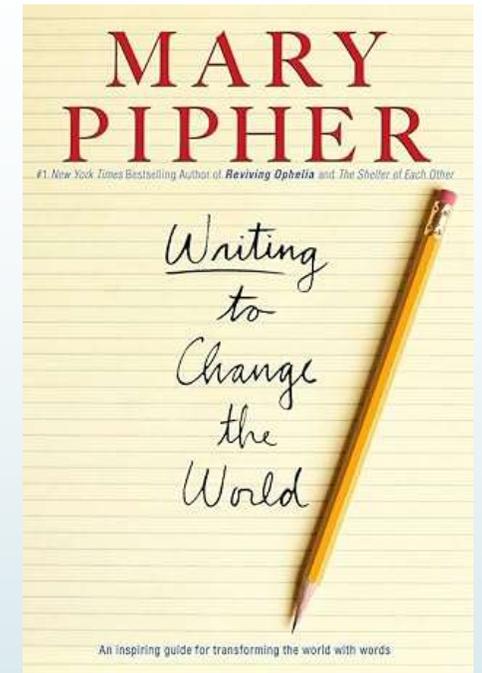
But, Lord, it's harder than it looks.



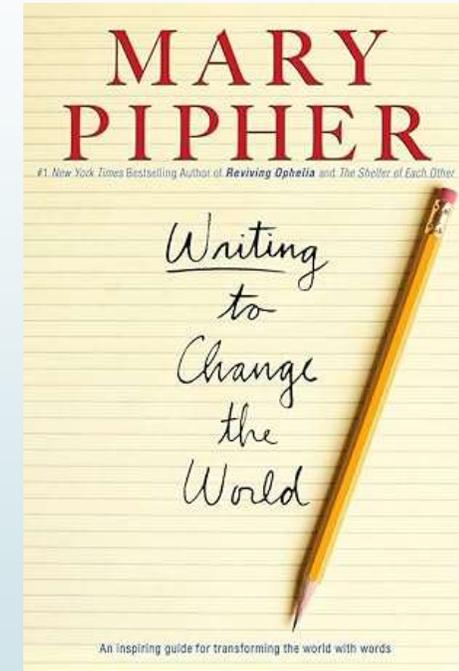
Mary Pipher

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)



Mary Pipher . . .





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?
- 

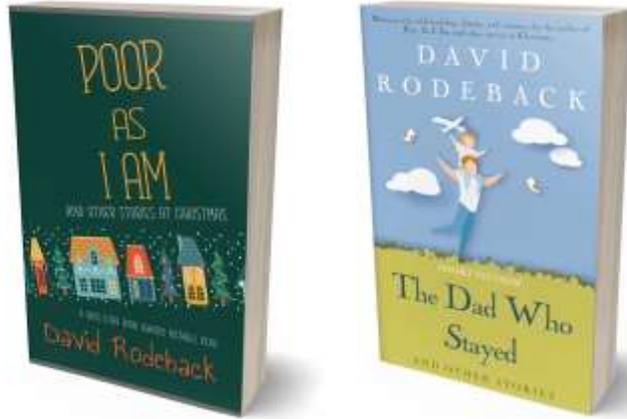


Q&A ASK ME **ANYTHING**



Thank you!

Where to find me and my books

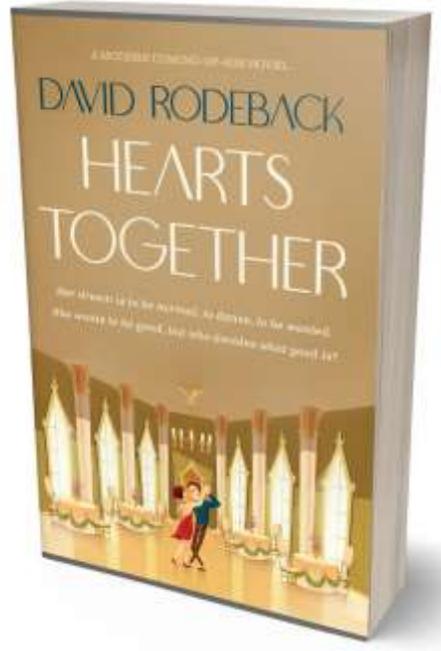


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