



Manuscript Appraisal

Title: Untitled

Author: xxxxxx xxxxxxxxx

Word Count: 54 000 words

Reader: xxxxx xxxxxx

Preliminary Remarks:

This novel shows a great deal of promise. The basic premise of the novel is exciting and innovative: I feel sure a publisher would be intrigued by the concept of a world where winged people and ‘normal’ humans are struggling to find peace while dealing with water shortages, etc. The writing is well-paced and the characters are engaging and empathetically-drawn, though they could also use further development. As my notes within the body of this report show, I feel that this novel is as yet under-developed. While there are a great many ideas and themes, intriguing characters and relationships, many of these are still at early draft stage. They have a great deal of potential, however, and I hope Author has the time, energy and commitment to push forward with this novel, which I felt very privileged and honoured to read in this early form.

Synopsis:

The novel appears to be set on an alternate earth – possible a post-apocalyptic section of the world the reader is familiar with. There are three ‘worlds’ within the geographic scope of the novel: the Mountain Dwelling, the City Dwelling, and Ethnel. Ethnel includes the water catchment for the three worlds, and the residents of Ethnel – the winged people – control the flow of water to the other two worlds. Relations between the three worlds are strained at best, with the two human worlds required to supply goods to the winged ones of Ethnel to retain access to water. The Mountain Dwelling people and the winged ones of Ethnel are the most prominent groups in the novel, while the character of Vidal is a City Dwelling man. The Mountain Dwelling people are farmers – earth-bound people. The City Dwellers, as their name suggests, live in the remnants of an old city, complete with relic computers. Both the Mountain Dwelling people and the City Dwelling people are human, while the winged ones of Ethnel are winged and able to fly.

The winged people came to the area from some unnamed other place, attacked the local people and forcibly took control of the water and of the old forests of Ethnel. There is an agreement in place between the three worlds, though it seems clear that both the Mountain Dwelling and, to a lesser extent, the City Dwelling peoples, see the Ethnel people as violent dictators rather than benevolent friends.

The Strymburghs are the ruling family of Ethnel and, by extension, of the three worlds. They are autocrats with a cool, if not cruel and self-serving approach to their relations with their neighbours. The family of the Strymburghs includes the parents: Nicholas and Daniella, and their three children: Rhys, Kate and Asteria. The Strymburghs are hereditary rulers who have held power for several generations.

The story centres on the character of Kate, who begins the novel as a fledgling deputy leader and ends as leader of her people after a brief but bloody battle between the people of Ethnel and the Mountain Dwelling people.

The manuscript opens with a brief prologue, in which Kate is injured during a battle.

The novel proper begins with Kate going on her first mission to meet with the Mountain Dwelling people, whom she is curious about. Kate has recently killed one of the Mountain Dwelling warriors, however, after they illegally entered the crossover (a stretch of Ethnel-controlled territory between the Mountain Dwelling and Ethnel proper). The body of the trespasser was burned in the kilns of Ethnel, as are the bodies of all transgressors. Kate's brother, Rhys, is already a deputy leader and is charged with showing her the ropes. The meeting is tense and abrasive, with the Mountain Dwelling people clearly unhappy with Ethnel's control of their water and murder of their warrior, while afraid of the physical and historic power represented by the winged ones.

During the meeting, the winged ones take delivery of a range of supplies, including large nets of felled timber, with which they return to Ethnel. On her return to Ethnel, Kate discovers that some of the timber supplied by the warriors of the Mountain Dwelling appears to have been logged from Ethnel forests.

Kate becomes increasingly at odds with her family's way of doing things as the tension between the Mountain Dwelling people and the winged people of Ethnel mounts. Unlike her somewhat bloodthirsty younger sister, Asteria, and her older brother, Rhys, she appears conflicted about killing. She releases a young boy she discovers in the crossover, although this clearly breaks with tradition.

In the second section of the book, Kate begins to make secret night-visits to the City Dwelling, where she meets and befriends a young man, Vidal. She visits him several times over the course of the novel. They exchange gifts and write letters to each other, developing a romantic relationship.

Kate is forced to leave the Strymburg home and spend time living with Shar-rook, one of the older men of the winged people, in the village. The winged people are preparing for war and Kate is charged with stockpiling arrows, made by Shar-rook.

In a bid to communicate peace with the Mountain Dwelling people in the event of a battle, Kate begins stockpiling her own cache of weapons in a locked room in the kilns. Kate etches/burns a message into her arrows.

When Rhys and a group of sensors discover evidence that the Mountain Dwelling people have been breaching the crossover with 'flotation devices'. The weir is raised and the Mountain Dwelling's water is cut down to a trickle.

Both sides prepare for war.

The third and final section of the book is a recounting of the various battles, which seem to take place over the course of a single day. Nicholas is killed, Asteria seriously wounded. The forests of Ethnel are set alight by the Mountain Dwelling people. The City Dwelling people remain uninvolved. Finally, Kate is injured attempting to speak to the Mountain Dwelling warriors about negotiating for peace. She makes some headway with them, however, and finally convinces Rhys – the only Strymburg still on the 'field' to support her in providing assistance to the Mountain Dwelling's injured warriors to escape the fires.

Rain has been falling throughout the latter half of the battle, so that while the fires come on some of them are dampened and/or stopped by the rain.

After a single day (perhaps two?) of battle there are many dead, the forests of Ethnel are burned/burning and Rhys and Kate take over leadership of the winged people.

In a final scene, Kate and a group of winged ones head towards the City Dwelling to announce (?) her leadership of Ethnel.

The Basics

This untitled novel is written in past tense, limited omniscient third person. The viewpoint character is Kate Strymurg, although there are occasional lapses of viewpoint.

The 'past' of the tense is quite immediate – as if the story is being related from just after things happen, rather than years later in a time of reflection.

The novel is largely a chronologically-order linear narrative, with occasional lapses – such as the prologue and a few feints forward to the future (such as at the end of chapter III:8/page 218).

The main characters, other than Kate, are Vidal, Rhys, and Asteria. Secondary characters include Shar-rook, Nicholas and Daniella, Strone-laid, Rizen, and Thulinde (though Thulinde never appears in the novel, but is only talked about).

The novel is set in an alternate (future?) earth, a geographic area of indeterminate size, divided into three 'worlds' or territories. While each of the worlds are somewhat politically independent, Ethnel – the winged ones – rule with an iron fist over the subservient 'human' worlds of Mountain Dwelling and City Dwelling, having forcibly taken control of the three worlds' water supplies several generations before the novel begins.

Worldbuilding

Worldbuilding is one of the core skills of this kind of speculative fiction. When done well, it is a source of deep pleasure for the reader: the sense of a well-made or well-imagined world that is complex, nuanced, coherent and realistic enough for the reader to be able to believe in it – to be able to suspend their disbelief enough to immerse themselves in it for the course of the novel is one of the major elements of success in a fantasy novel such as this.

The style of fantasy world in this novel is known as an alternate-earth (or alt-earth) novel. The major difference between the novel's world and our own is the introduction of another species: the winged ones – who have invaded a particular area of the earth and taken control of the water catchment.

There is some sense that this 'invasion' has come at the latter end of a semi-apocalyptic crisis for human civilization: water and other resources appear to have become depleted and human culture at the time of the novel has declined, technologically-speaking, to an earlier state. The Mountain Dwelling and City Dwelling peoples – and the Ethnel winged ones – live a simple, pre-industrial style of life with only

limited technological enhancements, though there is some indication that the City Dwelling people retain limited working ‘antiques’ such as computers.

Worldbuilding is a complex and complicated exercise and while this novel does have some wonderful worldbuilding in it, I feel that there is still a lot of development needed in this area before the novel will realise its potential. I’ve made some general notes here on the major aspects of Worldbuilding that I feel are still under-developed in this draft. It’s important to keep in mind, however, that each of these things are inter-related: that for every ‘shift’ from the real you imagine, you must work to imagine the consequences, and embed them in the lived and ordinary reality of your characters and their story.

Geography:

The three worlds of this novel are in fact not worlds, but territories or nations, living in close proximity to each other. While there are descriptions of the relative locations and geographic characteristics of each of the worlds, I think that these need more clarity. The novel states that the three peoples inhabit ‘the same lands’ (p4), a ‘vast peninsula’ (p6). Ethnel is high in an ‘impassable’ mountain range, though it is also surrounded by forest/the crossover, with the Mountain Dwelling located both beneath it (hence the water flows down towards it from the catchment) and ‘in a water shadow, with the tracts of land beyond an arid desert’ (p6). The Mountain Dwelling is described as relying on the ‘fertile soil of the lower plateau’ (p6) and as being on a ‘barren plateau in a water shadow’ (p6). I have concentrated here on descriptions offered in the opening pages of the novel, and have left out those about the location and geography of the City Dwelling. What I want to highlight is that, for a reader, these descriptions are confusing, and often contradictory.

I had a great deal of trouble, throughout the novel, understanding the geographic and political landscape of the worlds. The dimensions of the places, of the political entities, the distances between them, etc remain fuzzy to me after reading the novel a couple of times. How large is Ethnel? How far is it from Ethnel to the City Dwelling? How large are the City and Mountain Dwelling settlements? Are they single ‘villages’ or suburbs, or clusters of villages?

Similarly, the geographic elements of the landscape remain fuzzy and unclear to me: how far is it from Ethnel proper to the crossover, or to the water catchment or the kilns? Is Ethnel in a rocky mountainous area, as it sometimes appears to be, or a forest? Some of the problems I had with understanding the climate and geography of your world

have to do with the sense of the different micro-climate's relationships to each other: how is a rocky Alpine climate such as that of the Ethnel people, somehow very close to a marshy delta such as that near the City Dwelling?

I think that, if you haven't already done so, some work on a map of the worlds would be useful, if only to concretise your own sense of place. I would strongly suggest that you consider not just the aesthetic sense of each place – ie: the desire to have the winged live in a kind of eyrie, and the Mountain Dwelling people in a fertile plain – but the relationship between these places: a mountainous rocky Alpine forest is not going to be near a marshy, subtropical river delta, for example. It would help, I think, to be more specific in your own mind about where this peninsula is in relation to the equator: is it in a tropical, or temperate, area? What is the continent like to which this peninsula is attached? What kind of forests are the forests of the crossover: what fauna and flora are local to the area? A more concrete and specific sense of the place you are writing about will help to fix it more firmly in your own mind and be more able to simple and clearly communicate that sense of place to the reader.

I want here to say something that may seem, however, anti-intuitive to the task of mapping. At the moment, the descriptions of place are not embedded in the story: they are told from the point of view of a mapmaker or political analyst. People who live in a landscape, either a political or a physical one, don't ordinarily talk about them in the ways quoted above from your novel. The trick in conveying a sense of place in a novel is that you, as the writer, need to move away from purely physical and descriptive annotations of landscape. Descriptions of place in a novel are marked by the people who see and describe them, even in third person. In your novel, Kate is the viewpoint character and so, largely, it is Kate's vision of the landscape that the reader should be experiencing. A sense of the place as she sees it, not just physically, but emotionally, culturally, socially and politically. A sense of how she understands and interprets the landscape. She is not a disinterested author – or even a kind of fascinated author – but a player for whom these territories are known, and loaded with meaning.

I think the best way to demonstrate this embedded sense of place is with a couple of examples: here's one from the Australian writer Janette Turner Hospital's *Charades*. Like your novel, this extract is in limited third person (the viewpoint character is Charade), past tense:

The birds. To the tag end of trillions of years of decay and growth come the birds: bellbirds, lyrebirds, lorikeets, parakeets. Shadow and rotting sweetness

lure them. On their wings is such a weight of colour that they float dazed on the green air, slowly losing height, drifting down to where Charade sits crushing the mosses and ferns. Oh, she gasps. Oh.

She is five, perhaps six years old, rapt, knees hugged up under her chin. The fallen tree trunk behind her back, given over to creepers, is collapsing softly, and along its jellied spine where a flock of new saplings has a toehold – there is walnut, silky oak, mahogany – the jostling and clamoring for light is constant and silent and deadly earnest. If she sits still long enough, the philodendron will loop itself around her ankles, and kingfishers will nest in her hair.

Here's another example from a quite lovely young adult fantasy novel called *Travel Light Travel Light* by Naomi Mitchison:

Dragons like to live on blasted heaths and desolate, snow-capped, igneous mountains, but Bork or Hafr, who were young dragons, not many centuries old, would often take her for rides down to the deep woods or the rivers and, from a distance, they would point out to her the dwellings of men, the halls with the fields and barns and stockades round them at the head of the fjords, and the boats moored at the jetties or drawn up on land in times of storm. The biggest of these were called dragon ships, but the dragons themselves were never certain how to take this. It might, of course, and properly should be, a form of worship, but with the race of men one never knew.

What each of these examples do quite well is to give the reader the sense that while the author (and the characters) are deeply intimate with the physical and political shapes of the landscapes they are describing, they do not need to describe them in the kind of pseudo-map way you sometimes slip into in your novel. Instead their descriptions of landscape are embedded in the consciousness of their characters and story: they use the language of the characters, the sense of looking that comes out of a particular person at a particular time. The difference here is that they offer the reader not just (or perhaps not even) a sense of the physical dimension of place but what is far more important to a reader: the meaning of place. They offer the reader an insight into what it means *to the characters* of the novel, to live or visit such places.

Nomenclature/language

The question of what and how to name things in fantasy novels is a vexed question. The great father of contemporary fantasy – J R R Tolkein – took this question to perhaps extreme limits, investing each of his invented cultures, people and places with a language that had a specific, rooted relationship to history. In Tolkein, the names of people, places, etc were never just made up: they were made up by someone, at a particular time. They had meaning that was drawn from the physical, social and cultural meaning-making enterprises of those who had named them. People – writers- rarely go as far as Tolkein did, making up whole languages, any more. And yet, there is a sense in which the language and nomenclature of your story should still be consistent and meaningful. That is should enrich and support the other complex aspects of Worldbuilding in your work.

So: two major things that struck me as needing improvement in this draft of the novel; areas that offered great potential to enrich the Worldbuilding and thereby the reader's immersion in your world, where the ways in which places (and people) are named, and the general language and syntax used by the characters, especially the winged ones.

People and places

I found the names of the three worlds, and of their peoples, unnecessarily clunky and unwieldy. I think there is probably an easy fix for this: I can't imagine, for example, that the City Dwelling people call themselves the City Dwelling people, or that the Mountain Dwelling people call themselves (in their daily interactions, in their interior thoughts, in their politicians' speeches...) the Mountain Dwelling people. Nor do I think it works well, throughout the novel, for the winged people to constantly call themselves the winged people. These are unwieldy names of places and peoples and, in many areas of the novel (particularly the battle sequences in the latter third) bog down the writing unnecessarily, simply because the names of the people are so unwieldy. For example, the simple sentence: 'a female winged one flew towards a Mountain Dwelling warrior' is far more unwieldy than, say, 'a Roman woman flew towards a Gaul'. The secondary result of this kind of unweildiness is that your sentences become less capable of having more action in them: in the example I've just given, the sentence with your nomenclature is already long and probably can't sustain much more detail, whereas the second one is short and crisp (with the same level of detail) and could easily sustain the inclusion of more detail without the reader losing focus in the sentence.

I would suggest that you consider giving each of the peoples of your world either a racial or a political 'name' that is more easy to use: preferably a single word. The winged ones, for example, might have a racial name as their 'difference' to the other worlds is principally species-based, there is some movement towards this with the teenage winged ones, who are called chrysalises.

The two humanoid peoples (the City and Mountain Dwellers) might have a political name (like American, Australian, Swedish etc) as they appear to be of the same species/race but are differentiated by their political affiliation to their world.

Language and syntax

There is a particular kind of oddness to some of the turns of phrase and syntactic constructions in your novel. At times this adds to the sense of difference, and thereby to the worldbuilding, while at others it hinders clarity. I've made notes on these moments where the style impedes understanding on the hard copy of the manuscript, so I won't go into too much detail here. Constructions that are awkward or unusual that work include statements such as: "My mind is strong on what needs to happen" (p220) which is both unusual and clear. Whereas Nicholas's: "A trickling stream will quench their action" (p45) is ambiguous and unclear.

I do, however, want to talk a little about the ways in which you could further develop the syntax and language of your novel in order to enhance the worldbuilding.

In the worlds of your novel, the winged people have come from somewhere else, and presumably have a history of their own prior to their settlement on the peninsula. They are also markedly different to the other people of the peninsula both physically and socially/morally. I think you could make more of these differences on the level of language. I also think there is potential here to think more deeply and radically about the ways in which being winged might affect not just the winged ones' language, but also their family structures, morals, politics, etc.

There are some indications that you have considered the ways in which the winged ones' differences might be inflected in their language in the oaths that the Styrburgs use when frustrated, but I believe this could go further.

I would encourage you to read some books about birds: their physiology, mating habits, flocking and social structures, breeding patterns, methods of flying, etc. Not just to get a sense of what it might mean to be a winged creature, but also to begin to accumulate a more sophisticated and meaningful avian vocabulary. I presume, for example, that a creature with wings would have use more specific and meaningful words

than 'bottom feathers' (p1), and that they would have a quite complex and specific language for different modes of flight (just as we have a veritable dictionary of terms for the different ways of using our legs to move: walk, run, stumble, trot, amble, dance, etc). Similarly, creatures of the air might have a more complex and sophisticated understanding of, and language for talking about, the air through which they fly. A knowledge of wind patterns, thermal sinks, etc. Again, some solid research around the mechanics of flying, as around the science of wind, etc, would help you to build up a more sophisticated knowledge that you can then embed in your worldbuilding through your character's differentiated ways of reading, speaking about, and interacting with their environment and each other.

Similarly, though I don't think you need to over-think these things, I do think some more consideration might meaningfully be given to the biology of your winged creatures. While they are a staple of Christian and pre-Christian iconography, the physicality of a winged humanoid has been discussed at length in a range of venues, and some knowledge of the theories about how being winged would change an otherwise human body would be useful background knowledge for you. Birds, for example, are largely hollow-boned to decrease their weight. They also have large, 'puffy' chest with enormous lungs compared to their other organs. A human flyer might have similarly hollow bones (which would then be quite fragile compared to human bones), they might have hugely over-developed back and shoulder muscles to flap enormous wings. According to most theories, an 'angel's' wingspan would need to be three times their height to generate enough power to lift them from the ground. How would their arms and wings be joined? What would the shoulder area of an angel skeleton look like? Would the legs dwindle away in a kind of Darwinian evolution?

These things might seem like an irritation: beside-the-point questions in some sense. Certainly there are those who argue that there is a certain kind of fantasy novel in which the fantastic elements are not up for questioning. Nevertheless, most fantasy publishers, and readers, expect the author to have answers to these kinds of questions. There is a sense in the fantasy-reading community that you only get one, small, gimme per novel. In your novel, I don't think that the nature of the winged creatures is that gimme. The fact of them is, but their physical, social, historical and political nature needs to make sense: needs to be a complex but meaningful interweaving of imagined facts that are as logical and coherent as our own.