

DEVELOPMENTAL EDIT LETTER

Title: *REDACTED*

Author Name: REDACTED

Overview

Key Strengths:

- Depth of research. The amount of research that has been done is clear! And it is, for the most part, embedded in the setting and in character. It's very well done!
- Clarity of prose. This is not faint praise! I've read hundreds of novels, some for students and some published, where it is nearly impossible to follow what is going on. And I don't mean in a Faulkneresque way. (Faulkner was once asked by an interviewer what he would advise to readers who complain that they can read a passage three times and still not know what's going on. His advice was, "Read it four times.") I mean that the author just couldn't maintain clarity at a sentence level. But I was never once lost in this manuscript.
- Secondary characters. I really enjoyed, for instance, the second younger Thomas. His open defiance made him a delight to read. The same was often the case with the brother Thomas. He drove the action in the scenes and was a whole lot of fun.

Main Weaknesses:

- The protagonist. Martin comes across as very wishy-washy on the page, and his flaws are never really shown, such that there is very little room for a character arc. I will elaborate on this later in this letter.
- Lack of engagement with the world. Because of Martin's class and role, we never really see the depredations of the English. A glaring example of this comes during the famine, when, while everyone else in the country seems to be starving, we get multiple scenes where Martin is shown enjoying elaborate and decadent meals.
- Ahistoricity. Though the research is well done, Martin spends most of his time actually arguing the position of the English because of his opposition to armed resistance. It was, of course, armed resistance that led to the emancipation of Ireland – the Irish War of Independence. Meaning, to argue only peaceful means of resistance is ultimately to argue the English position, because without armed resistance there would have been no emancipation. Likewise, to argue against armed resistance during a genocide is morally insane, and very few contemporary scholars would argue that the famine was not a genocide. (For more on the connection between colonization and genocide generally speaking, I strongly recommend Jean-Paul Sartre's *On Genocide*.) Historically speaking, those characters arguing for armed

resistance are in the right. This is unambiguous, as it was exactly what was borne out by history. Which means that Martin's position is clearly historically wrong and ineffective.

- Conflict in scene. I will go into this more, but there are far too many scenes where characters sit around talking agreeably. The heart of every scene is conflict, and a scene without conflict is not a scene. Full stop. I will elaborate on this later in this letter.

Prose-Level Issues:

- Redundancy. This is not a line edit, so I did not note every occurrence, but there are numerous moments in the text when characters sit around and tell each other what we've just seen on the page. Every example of this should be cut. There is no greater way to lose the interest of a reader than to signal to them that they don't actually need to pay attention because most of the text is just rehashing information. Likewise, there are many occasions where Martin closes a scene by telling the reader what the scene means. This is unnecessary and deprives the reader of one of the great pleasures of reading – interpreting dramatic scenes for themselves. The nice thing about this is that cutting these talking/rehashing scenes will go a long way to reducing wordcount to a level that will position your book more competitively in the marketplace.
- Anachronisms. I only noted a couple of these, but the language itself often belies the historical setting. There are metaphors used that didn't come into common usage until far later than this book is set. There needs to be a strong editorial pass with a sharp eye towards these. I might recommend something like *The Concise New Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, which is a fun guide to historical slang and metaphor which traces usage by the year. I would also highly recommend saturating yourself in Irish novels from the time period you are writing about. This is as important for historical research as academic works.
- Salutations and throat-clearing. Characters spend an inordinate amount of time saying hello to each other, swapping small talk, and offering each other libations. All of these instances can, and should, be cut. They're always going to be dull on the page. Let film be your guide. You will note that in almost all cases of phone calls, characters in movies never even say hello or goodbye. They cut right to the chase. This indicates urgency, meaning conflict and tension. Screenwriters know that small talk is lethal for a scene. It drains any suspense right out of it.

Plot:

Following are the issues I see with plot and structure. I will present possible solutions in the suggested action plan at the end of this letter.

Generally speaking, the bones of the plot are workable! Meaning, in the first book (first we read; second in the trilogy), Martin's brother shows up and he has to make a choice about whether to support his brother in his attempt to work towards Irish liberation and justice for their mother murdered by Gowan, or, ultimately, to side with the English by working against his brother, and work against justice for Gowan.

The issue with this plot is not the setup; the setup provides plenty of interest! The issue is actually indicated by the name, *Hunger for Justice*. At no point in the first book does Martin seem to be “hungry for justice.” The person interested in justice is his brother Thomas, and Martin spends most of his time criticizing him and arguing for moderation – which, ultimately, is ahistorical because moderation did not, in fact, liberate Ireland, and justice in the context of Gowan would be to kill him. Justice is what Thomas is after; Martin seems mostly concerned with his finances, his law practice, staying out of jail (understandably), and his reputation vis-à-vis drinking.

Which brings us to the excessive drinking. We don’t see it. At all. My guess is that drinking was fairly common in this time and place, so I imagine you would have to be pretty extreme for it to be remarked upon, and we don’t see Martin doing much of it, let alone in a way that impacts his family/practice.

All of this means that we just don’t see a character arc for Martin, which is the heart of every plot. He ends up the same moderate character at the end of this book that he was at the beginning. Thomas’s death doesn’t seem to bother him much, let alone impact his worldview or behavior. And all we get about the drinking – which we never really see – is that he cuts down on it, not even quits. There’s no real character arc there.

I’m reminded of Melville’s remarks on the moderate man: “You are the moderate man, the invaluable understrapper of the wicked man. You, the moderate man, may be used for wrong, but are useless for right.” Melville wrote this in the context of American chattel slavery, but it seems just as easily applied to the colonization of Ireland.

As to the second book, we have a new Thomas, which is good! That should give Martin an opportunity for redemption for failing his brother and being on the wrong side of justice. However, Martin goes out of his way to tell the reader again and again that what makes younger Thomas a good guy is that he didn’t actually engage in any violence. Which indicates that Martin hasn’t changed at all. Moreover, Martin does not seem to carry any regret about the way he behaved with his brother, so there’s no possibility of redemption – and no arc.

His argument against armed resistance is particularly hard to swallow in the second book given the background of the famine. We get a lot of evidence as to English wrongdoing in the courtroom – though very little in-scene; the only way it touches Martin is through his son-in-law and that’s resolved with a quick jaunt to the bank – which should indicate to Martin that the English are all too happy to kill the Irish. But still Martin moderately clings to his argument against armed resistance.

Even the drinking provides no arc in the second book. He drinks moderately, occasionally wishing to drink more, but never doing it. There’s again no room for an arc, because we never see anything like a flaw. (Or at least not one that the book recognizes as such; I would argue that Martin’s moderation is more of a flaw than anybody else’s in either book.)

Then we have the scenes themselves. The heart of any scene is conflict. As Robert McKee writes, “Nothing moves forward in a story except through conflict.” And to quote Jean-Paul Sartre, “The essence of reality is scarcity. There isn’t enough love in the world, enough food, enough justice, enough time in life. To gain any sense of satisfaction in our life we must go into heady conflict with the forces of scarcity. To be alive is to be in perpetual conflict.”

I would strongly advocate trying to find conflict on the scene level in *every* scene. If you can't find any conflict in a given scene, than it's likely that scene could be cut without any negative impact to story. I suspect you'll realize you *do* need many of these scenes, which simply means the conflict that necessitates them needs to become clearer on the page. Remember, what you are really looking for is the interpersonal kind of conflict that drives everything scene by scene, because characters' competing desires cause friction. Any scene which features two characters talking agreeably is dead on the page.

Characters:

Much of the issues with character have already been addressed in the above. Martin's character is presented in such a way that he barely seems to have any flaws (unless you're in agreement with me that moderation itself is a flaw in this context) That can work: Hamlet is such a character of moderation and indecision, but that flaw manifests with tragic consequence, without which, his character and the story wouldn't matter. Often, with Martin, we get the sense he was written in a deliberate attempt to present him as likeable, which has the usual result: Instead of coming across as likeable, he comes across as rather bland.

The main issue is that he needs an arc. Actually, he needs two arcs, and they should coincide. His first arc needs to do with his drinking, which needs to actually be represented. His second arc has to do with his vacillation on the Irish independence and the appropriateness of rebellion, including by armed resistance. He needs to end the series either actually hungering for justice or giving up on the idea altogether. You've setup the two Thomas's such that they're the perfect vehicle for Martin to have an arc – the younger Thomas can represent the possibility for Martin's redemption vis-à-vis the way he failed his brother Thomas.

But for this to work, he has to understand that he did fail his brother Thomas, and there's no indication of that at all. This, to me, seems a serious issue. And one that could dovetail neatly with his alcoholism: Meaning, guilt and regret could put him in a much darker place, one where he is drinking heavily.

To quote Flannery O'Connor, "There is something in us, as storytellers and as listeners to stories, that demands the redemptive act, that demands that what falls at least be offered the chance to be restored. The reader of today looks for this motion, and rightly so, but what he has forgotten is the cost of it. His sense of evil is diluted or lacking altogether, and so he has forgotten the price of restoration. When he reads a novel, he wants either his senses tormented or his spirits raised. He wants to be transported, instantly, either to mock damnation or a mock innocence."

By pushing Martin's character into a darker place due to failing his brother, we would give him a greater fall. And from a greater fall, a greater redemptive arc. This, I think, is essential.

Setting:

The setting itself, historical Ireland, is nice! However, Martin seems barely in this world, except that he ruminates on it. We see very little of Martin engaging with English oppression except in court –

where he is a representative of English colonial law. If the book is about justice, we see almost none of the central conflict in the book in scene with Martin actively engaging with it. As I said above, the most egregious example of this comes in the impact (or lack thereof) of the famine on Martin. We hear terrible stories about the famine, but Martin seems to eat lavishly throughout it, and the only direct contact he has with it is resolved with a quick trip to the bank. Martin needs to be closer to the suffering around him. This is essential.

Voice:

The voice needs some attention. As I said, there are some anachronisms, wherein metaphors and sayings that were not in usage in the time period of the novel are used by Martin. Those need to be cleaned up. Too, I think there needs to be some focus on a closer hewing towards the vernacular of the day. The only ways I can think of to do this are to use resources like the slang dictionary I referenced, along with Irish novels or plays from the time. Plays can be helpful since they are pure dialogue. There are also nineteenth century Irish dictionaries. Perhaps even catalogues and/or newspapers if you can find these online or have the ability to go to Ireland again to do this kind of research. The answer, to me, is to steep yourself in materials that will help you with the voice.

Suggested Action Plan

That's all the hard stuff, I promise! And now I'm going to try to give you a plan for revision.

I suggest breaking revision up into bite-sized chunks, so you're just focusing on one task at a time and doing one thing after another. Each task will be its own editing pass, which has the added benefit that you'll end up looking at each scene and sentence over and over.

This is exactly what I do to my own manuscripts, and what I coach my writing mentees to do. Over and over again, steeping yourself in your work. I start with the biggest issues and address those first and then move to smaller issues. I move from the big to small because a lot of times the stuff I do to address bigger issues resolves the smaller issues. You'll move pass by pass until you are sure you've done everything you can possibly do. Then, you'll send it off to a publisher or agent, and they will return another batch of feedback that you will do the same thing with. Ad nauseum, until there's nothing else to do. This is the nature of revision: a lot of it is simply grunt labor.

In this interest, I think Martin needs some work. Both in his character and in his agency (or lack thereof) throughout. So I'm going to make a proposition. If it doesn't feel right to you, ignore it, and if it does inspire you, use it! My propositions are aimed at illustrating the issues – so you are, of course, welcome to them if you find them helpful.

In the first book, Martin needs to be closer to the main dramatic question of the book and needs to be far less wishy washy on Irish liberation, especially if this book (or trilogy) is going to be called *Hunger for Justice*. Likewise, he needs a character arc. He has to have serious flaws that manifest in the book so he can be offered redemption, per Flannery O'Connor.

The easiest way to do both of these things – illustrate his flaws and move him closer to the main dramatic question of the book – is to give him something like a double life. If it was me, I would

maintain his bourgeois pro-English life. (And it is necessarily pro-English. After all, if he represents the legal system of the English, he is, by definition, pro-English; as the great civil rights activist and poet Audre Lorde once said, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.") So in one version of Martin, I would keep him as the lawyer and family man.

However, spurred into action by the appearance of his brother, I would put him in direct connection with his brother's militant revolutionary group. I would make him a reluctant member. One, perhaps, who does not agree with all of their tactics, but one who believes in the cause. After all, one can believe in armed resistance to colonization and genocide without approving of every action. Further, if Martin begins as someone adverse to violence who ultimately must accept the necessity of violence to bring about change, this provides wonderful opportunities for conflict and social commentary! We get the inner conflict of how this colonization is forcing him to behave in ways he doesn't want to behave. We'd also get conflict between he and his brother, as his brother already accepts what is necessary (armed resistance) while Martin is still naïvely entrenched in the idea that there can be peaceful resolution with a violent and genocidal colonizer. This turmoil and conflict would begin Martin's double life by putting Martin much closer to the action. It would force an arc upon him, perhaps one he doesn't even want, and that is stupendous for how it will be rife with conflict. It would provide far more room for conflict with Bertie too. Having Martin have stronger convictions could make for more dynamic scenes, as would his having a secret from his family and bourgeois friends.

Likewise, the maintenance of this double life could provide a pretty good reason for some overdrinking. Which could lead to more conflict. Ironically, I think both of these maneuvers would make Martin a far more sympathetic character. Readers love characters of great agency who take action, even actions we don't condone or agree with! We want to see characters struggling with their flaws in dramatic action, just like we need our characters to have agency lest they bore us. I think this would solve both those problems.

The plot could stay much the same to my mind. Martin would just be more directly involved. Ultimately, I think he still needs to betray his brother as he does, for fear of spending his life in jail. But this should be much more of a torment to him. Right now, he just writes Thomas off and doesn't seem to care in the least that he dies. Instead, this should be something that causes him great pain, and, obviously, leads to more drinking.

This sets up the second book. In the second book, after a period of lying low after his brother's death, Martin should be deeply moved by the famine. In the current writing, it barely seems to matter to him and doesn't impact his daily life at all. But if you were to have him furious about it, perhaps walking and taking stock of it, becoming bloody-minded as he's watching the genocidal consequences of English policy, even considering trying to return to revolutionary action, then he's far better primed for this second Thomas. This is also all a pretty good inspiration to drink! Which means we're back in Martin's flaws.

The second Thomas should represent the possibility of redemption for Martin for failing his brother Thomas. This seems obvious. And he should take the case for that (unspoken) reason. But I do think the ultimate resolution, Martin's letter writing campaign, is pretty dramatically unsatisfying. It's hard to make writing letters very suspenseful. So I think Martin needs to again align himself with revolutionaries and be doing something else to try to get Thomas free besides just the letter writing.

The easiest way to do this would be to take what's only in a few sentences in the afterword and actually make this the crux of the last third of the novel: Have Martin attempt to help the younger Thomas escape and ultimately succeed. With the help of Irish revolutionaries, attempting to help Thomas escape would provide Martin with a double life that he would have to keep hidden from his family. Which means, again, he would be drinking more and fighting even more with his family. And then ultimately succeeding when Thomas does escape would provide his redemptive arc. The main thing is to drive conflict, so that it, as much as possible, is the heart of every scene.

Once you've dealt with book-length macro issues, you should do a pass aimed at checking every scene to ensure that there is enough conflict to sustain it.

I have a system for this, taken from screenwriter Robert McKee's book, *Story: Style, Structure, Substance, and the Principles of Screenwriting*. (I'm going to run a little long here, because a book lives and dies by its scenes.)

First, McKee's definition of a scene:

An action through conflict in more or less continuous time and space that turns the value-charged condition of a character's life on at least one value with a degree of perceptible significance.

I like that definition because of two things: First the concept of a turning point, which, to me, is not a bad test of a scene overall. We are often told that every scene should advance the story, but it's not always clear what that means. This, I think, provides a wonderful indication of what a scene should do. It should always provide some kind of turning point in the value-charged condition of a character's life. If nothing turns, then most likely that the scene may not be necessary. (I'll define what a value-charge is here in a second!)

In each scene, the protagonist should make a choice under pressure to achieve their scene objective. This will lead to conflict, which is the heart of every scene. That's why McKee says that a scene is an "action through conflict."

McKee gives a list of six questions that can be asked of every scene, no matter what type, to help test it. I go through every scene in every one of my novels, asking these questions. Not because I'm a masochist, but because it's the best tool I've ever found for making sure my scenes really work.

Here are the questions (including some definitions):

1. The first thing you need to identify is the scene's protagonist. This will usually be the novel's protagonist – though not in the case of novels with multiple POV characters, or one with a strongly drawn protagonist and antagonist, where the role of scene protagonist shifts. A good and simple test of this is: Whose POV is the scene written in (first person or third person limited)? That may not always be the answer, but often it is. You're looking for which character is driving the action.

Once you've located the scene's protagonist, then you need to define their desire for yourself. What do they want? This is, as in every other part of your book, the most

important question you can ask. Try to frame it in two stages: They want to do _____ to get _____.

2. The next question is who or what's stopping them from doing what they want to get what they want? In other words, who or what is the antagonist of the scene? This needn't always be a person, of course, but it often is.

So the next question is: What does the antagonist want? Again, try to frame it in those two stages: They want to do _____ to get _____. In the best examples, the competing desires will put them in immediate conflict with each other.

3. Identify the value charge at stake for your protagonist in the scene. The term "value charge" doesn't really mean anything complicated, just whatever's at stake in the scene for the protagonist. If, as is often the case of crime novels, the value charge is money, then where does that charge lie? Is it positive or negative? Did they just rob a liquor store so they've got some money, and they're flush, so the charge is at the positive? Or did their transmission go out on the car that morning and they're flat busted, in desperate need of money, so it's at the negative?

There can be less tangible value charges as well. One example McKee gives is: "Freedom. The protagonist is at the negative, a prisoner of his own obsessive ambition." Another is: "Faith. The protagonist is at the positive, he trusts in God to get him out of this situation." The main thing is that SOMETHING is at stake, and that that something should be related to the main conflict of the book.

4. Identify the closing value charge of the scene. If the value charge you're focusing on is, as in my very material example, money, do they end with the same amount of money that they started? If so, there's probably no need for the scene, or you need to find a different value charge to work with. Otherwise nothing has happened because nothing has changed, and as a result, your scene is dead on the page. What you're looking for is that the protagonist ends up in a different place than where they started.
5. Next, identify the beats. I'm not talking about dialogue beats, but the back-and-forth action and reaction in the characters. You have to keep the subtext in mind here: What the characters are doing on the surface level, as well as what they're actually doing underneath. McKee likes to take these and label them with an active gerund phrase, specifically ones that indicate emotion. For instance, in the case of a male protagonist begging his girlfriend not to leave him, he would tag that "pleading" instead of "begging." Maybe even "groveling at her feet." Something to indicate the interior state of the character.

He continues (and I think he's really good here):

"Now look across the scene to see what reaction that action brought, and describe that reaction with an active gerund phrase. For example, "Ignoring the plea."

This exchange of action and reaction is a beat. As long as it continues, Character A is “Groveling at her feet” but Character B is “Ignoring the plea,” it’s one beat. Even if their exchange repeats a number of times, it’s still one and the same beat. A new beat doesn’t occur until behavior clearly changes.

If, for example, Character A’s groveling changed to “Threatening to leave her” and in reaction Character B’s ignoring changed to “Laughing at the threat,” then the scene’s second beat is “Threatening/Laughing” until A and B’s behavior changes for a third time. The analysis then continues through the scene, parsing it into its beats.

6. Now that you’ve got the beats located, identify the turning point of the scene. Review those active gerund phrases and find the point in the scene where the actions and reactions start to turn towards the closing value charge of the scene. This is your turning point.

Note that in the richest scenes the individual beats may feel erratic, almost random. This is because the gap between expectation and result is being exploited, but also because the inner lives and desires of the characters are not straight-forward. This is good! This means that your scene is not on the nose; there are forces playing out that your characters are not entirely aware of.

I’ll be honest, I don’t usually answer questions 5 and 6. Once I have the protagonist and antagonist nailed down, along with the opening and closing value charge, I don’t need to go through every single beat. I pretty much only do those when I have a scene that I just cannot figure out. Usually, it’s boring to me and I can’t answer why.

If you are anything like me, you will probably come to many scenes where the conflict is unclear, nonexistent, or there is no turning of the value charge. At this point, it will be up to you what you want to do with these scenes. If it’s an important scene for the novel, then by all means, locate a value charge and conflict and rewrite it aimed at those things.

However, I think there are many scenes that probably will not be necessary once the macro work is complete. (Just as there will be new scenes that need to be written.) I submit that perhaps you don’t actually need two (or three) books, but can combine them into one with a clear character arc for Martin – a redemptive act for failing his brother in arranging the younger Thomas’s escape, which ultimately leads to a lessening of guilt which leads him, finally, to a long-sought sobriety. (I might actually have him quit drinking just as he makes the choice to help Thomas escape – knowing that being drunk will probably get in the way of him achieving his goal.)

While doing this work, I would at the same time be immersing myself as much as humanly possible in Irish literature. I would focus on novels from the time period you’re writing about, as well as those which came after. You have a great advantage with this novel in that the Irish have always punched well above their weight class in literature. In the nineteenth century, there are the national tales aimed at explaining the Irish to the English, but also, of course, Irish gothic novels which are a blast to read.

Perhaps start with *Castle Rackrent* by Maria Edgeworth, published in 1800, and then move up from there. There are also a number of historical novels directly written about the famine. I read *Grace* by Paul Lynch when it came out and remember it being a beautiful novel. And, of course, I would not neglect the incredible body of Irish literature from the twentieth century, from James Joyce to my personal favorite, Flann O'Brien.

There is so much to pull from, and I would read widely, taking notes on phrases, metaphors and the cadences of the authors' syntax. As much as possible, this book should read as if in the voice of a truly Irish novel.

Lastly, I would approach the minor issues:

- Cut every instance of throat clearing and all salutations and the like from every scene, ensuring that as much as possible, the boring filler which we have to endure in everyday life is absent from the page.
- Verify that all cliches and turns of phrase are historically appropriate.
- Work through whatever notes make sense for you to incorporate in the manuscript.
- Make sure all redundancy is cut.

Now, all of the above is just one way to approach the issues in the book. It's definitely not the only way! The most important thing is that the novel itself is rooted in conflict and that every scene carries that conflict. Likewise, your protagonist must be as close to said conflict as humanly possible and must have the kinds of flaws which can sustain a complete character arc. There are as many ways to achieve this as there are to write a novel!

Mostly, though, thank you so much for providing me with the opportunity to read this. It was truly a pleasure.