



FABER ACADEMY – END OF COURSE FEEDBACK: Alasdair Reid

WRITING A NOVEL (ONLINE)

Congratulations on completing the How to Write a Novel course – and the first 10-15,000 words of your novel.

At the start of the course you were all hopeful, but not necessarily confident that you would get this far. However despite busy professional and home lives, you have all worked incredibly hard to get here. We are impressed by the workload you have taken on, your dedication to meeting deadlines, and the quantity of learning materials you have absorbed and responded to.

This point in your development as a fiction writer is critical. Some of you will choose to continue with the novel you started on the course. Some of you will decide – using your newly refined critical skills – to move on and start another one, or perhaps to start again with the same idea. Some will continue writing for pleasure – and because your sanity demands it – while others will decide to aim for some type of publication.

This feedback is designed to inform that decision, and to help you shape the next stage in your development as a writer. It is structured around the subjects covered in some (not all) of the sessions, and takes the stated aims and objectives of the course into account.

This feedback will:

- Offer a professional and critical perspective on your work
- Be structured around key topics covered during the course
- Comment on the strengths and weaknesses of your ideas and writing
- Inform your decision about the next steps in your development as a writer
- Assist you in further developing a realistic perspective on your ability and achievements as a novelist
- Suggest areas you need to focus on to continue improving, including creative ideas, writing technique, research, critical judgment and awareness of genre and audience
- Represent an honest, supportive, critique.

This feedback will not:

- Give you a grade or a mark
- Represent a copy edit of your work.

Your feedback

NOVEL IDEA

This is a good, interesting idea for a novel and one that feels well captured in the two pitches.

Short pitches are notoriously hard to get right, and here I think there feels a strong central challenge at the heart of the story. Words like ‘forced’ and ‘confront’ are great in describing fiction – that sense of compulsion to act, and also of conflict are what a story should be about. Perhaps linkage is less clear that it could be, as to why Anne’s disappointment with England leads to this, but if you can tighten this up, it works well within itself.

I say that slightly, because when we get into the longer pitch, and the extra words allow you to expand the story more, the focus moves away from what is in the shorter pitch. We have the wider circle of protagonists, with Charles and Harold in particular added into the mix, but the ‘beating heart’ of the story sounds as though it is more Anne’s own journey of change than it is to do with the relationship with her husband. Perhaps that needs matching up between the two pitches: perhaps, too, a little more in the way of narrative could come out: we get detail about Anne, we get overview of what the characters face, but less so how events might unfold. The pitch ends talking about ‘her most challenging flight yet into the unknown’ and there’s an element of that in the summary – we know who is flying the plane, and where it is heading, but not how she is going to go about getting there, if that makes sense.

CHARACTER

As I said on the course, a reader will read on in a book for one of two reasons: either they care about the characters or they want to know what happens next (or, ideally, both). You want the reader to be interested in what happens to the leads and, where appropriate rooting for them to succeed.

The central characters in this story so far are the foursome of Anne and Charles Lindbergh, Harold Nicolson and Vita Sackville-West. Writing about real people is always a mixed blessing, I think – you have detail and information to base your telling on, but less wiggle room, arguably, to use your imagination to help them come alive.

The most successful characters for me in these opening chapters are Vita and Harold. Vita is immediately an intriguing, curious presence: Harold has a purposefulness and a drive to him that appeals. Charles is a little more elusive, possibly because he spends more time off-screen than on. Anne, meanwhile, feels a little bit enigmatic and although she is one of the two viewpoint characters here, I didn’t feel I knew her as well as I did Harold, by comparison. She feels a little contained and with an element of holding the reader at arm’s length. I appreciate there might be method behind this – she is, after all, on a journey to find herself and one can’t do that unless one is lost in the first place. But even so, more in the way of internal thoughts and feelings in particular might work well here. Where we do get those flashes, such as the anger at the Royal dinner, they work well.

VOICE

As we looked at in session four, voice can feel that slightly amorphous element to writing, but hopefully feels less so when you break it down into its smaller, particular components.

Here, I think there is more that you can do to bring this out. There's something distinct in the telling of the prologue, in the use of language that doesn't quite follow through in the text that follows. Here, I think that more in the way of details and descriptions (see below) could come and help the text feel unique. Which isn't to say that the text isn't well written, but that its individuality to make the text uniquely yours needs more to be fully brought out.

VIEWPOINT

This is a story told in the third person, with the opening chapters being told either from the viewpoint of Harold or Anne. I don't know whether the intention is to include material further down the line from Charles as well, but the effect here is to make the story both about Harold and Anne, and almost more Harold than Anne so far – if Anne is the central character, do keep an eye on the weighting and balance between the strands.

The most important element with viewpoint is consistency and this I think you achieve well here. There is only the very, very occasional shift away from the character we are followed. What to watch out for more, I think, is where the text turns a little authorial ('There wouldn't be much of a story to tell if they hadn't fallen for Long Barn...') This always begs the question as to who precisely is doing the telling here: as such I'd try and keep to a minimum as much as possible.

STRUCTURE

The thrust of the story in these opening chapters is split into two between these two main character strands – Harold's growing influence as a politician, and Anne/Charles' arrival/settling in at Long Barn. Anne's story is a slower burn and it partly for this reason that Harold's story feels more prominent early on – that and the fact that four of the first six chapters are from his viewpoint. If this is Anne's story primarily, I wonder whether that balance is right, and we need a bit more of her earlier on. But the way that the narrative is broken down into the chapters feels clearly defined and well-worked – the lengths keep the plot moving forwards and broadly there is a good pace to proceedings.

DIALOGUE

The dialogue in the text feels well-worked and there is a good, broad balance between this and other elements of the text such as description. Possibly a little bit more could be done to make the American and English voices distinct – there is a moment, for example, where Anne talks about being as poor as church mice, which to my mind felt quite an English turn of phrase.

I'd also keep an eye on how much (or rather, how little) non-verbal detail you utilise in the conversations. A bit more body language wouldn't go amiss in helping to visualise the conversations and flesh them out. Where this is used, there can sometimes be a familiar ring to it (the rolling of the eyes, for example). And sometimes, have a bit more confidence in the reader to interpret the signs. So for example, 'Harold indicated with a shake of his head and a flutter of his hand that Van was no to be silly': here trust that the reader will understand what the body language means.

DESCRIPTION

Description is also an area where I feel there could be room for improvement. At times this is strong and sharp – see the description of Van's club, which makes a good use of both colour and the senses for example. But in other places, I think it can either feel lacking in the detail, or the descriptions given are more general. The opening chapter with Long Barn is a case in point here – the reader needs to understand why Anne and Charles fall for it, but I don't get enough of a sense of that as I read through. Also important to get across here are the period details – capturing the 'when' of the 1930s details as much as the 'where' is important to bring out.

RESEARCH

As with any piece of historical fiction, this is a story that requires a good deal of research to pull off – particularly as you are closely basing on real people and events. I know from our conversations on the course that you've done your homework and know your stuff here: if anything, the challenge here is to not let the facts and information you've discovered get in the way of the story. Choose carefully what you want the reader to know and allow the space for the narrative to breathe.

WRITING STYLE AND FORESHADOWING

I'd be surprised if you didn't write well and there is a cleanliness and clarity to the text that appeals. It reads easily, which belies the hard work undertaken to get to this point. Apart from the various points described above, the main thing I would keep an eye on going forwards are the number of familiar phrases that appear in the text (and often the text proper, rather than in the dialogue): so for example, the wrong end of the stick, take them under his wing, alarm bells start to ring, dropped his bombshell, a trail of crumbs, a shot across his bows, and so forth. Yes, there's an element in a first draft of getting the words down, but on a rewrite such phrases should be rooted out (and by doing so and replacing with something fresher, will help with the issues of voice above).

Foreshadowing is something that I think you could make more of in the text – these can be both small and large (the looming war), but a bit more ominousness could work well.

GENRE AWARENESS/COMMERCIAL POTENTIAL

You've got a good sense of genre, I think: this is historical fiction, and one from its subject matter with a literary bent. In terms of commercial potential, you're writing something that feels eminently readable – the question, probably, will be how much of a pull this particular story is for an agent or publisher.

SUGGESTED NEXT STEPS

In short, keep writing. While it is great looking at things in summary and synopsis, it is only once you have a full text there to play with can you really get stuck in to the rewriting and redrafting necessary to fully realise a book. There are questions for me over the structure, but this will be clearer once you have more text down as to what the way forward should be.

Certainly, I've really enjoyed working with you over the last few months and you should be pleased with what you've achieved so far. However you decide to take your novel forwards from here, be it Work in Progress, mentoring, keeping up with your fellow students or whatever, I wish you the best of luck in taking your writing forwards from here.

Tom