

Critique  
Peace Comes in Pieces  
Fiction  
307 pages

## PLOT

### Strengths:

Matt's story is that of hard work, efficiency, kindness, and courage. The reader learns about the quality of man he is from the beginning of *Peace Comes in Pieces* when Matt brings the six-month-old donkey, Trig, home to his valley in Kenfus, Utah.

What is interesting about this piece is how you layer the action: there are scenes such as Trigs homecoming and the rescue of Kylie, and then there are the explicit, brutal murders that Boss and Slimball commit. Such extremes in behavior do not often appear in the same story, so you are challenging the reader to constantly adjust to what is happening in the book. This strategy keeps the reader guessing about what will happen next. The infusion of the sheriff's humor also added color to the story, allowing another point of connection between the reader and the characters.

While there are structural problems that will be addressed below, this is a good story with characters that readers will embrace and characters who offer enough conflict to hold the readers' interests. The themes of love, immorality, justice, and kindness are covered in detail throughout the book.

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### **Weaknesses:**

This story is complicated. It has multiple characters and scenes that take place in the past and present and in a variety of locations. Your challenge as a writer is to make sure the reader knows who you are writing about, in what time frame and location, and whether the action is happening now or in the past.

From the first chapter, you jump around a lot when discussing Matt's purchase of Trig, then the purchase of the valley, and Kylie's attack. There was a point in this chapter that I had to stop and review the pages I had already read to match the names of the animals with their species. As you write about the animals, especially since they dominate the first chapter, help the reader to know them by matching their species with their names even while in the middle of the action of the rescue.

As you get into Troy's story, this is where the problems with the structure of the book begin to manifest. First, it takes Ben much too long to tell what he knows about Troy. This is a pacing issue that I will get into with more detail under the "pacing" sub-heading. The point is not to lose the reader's interest. If a character takes too long to tell what turns out to be a very compelling story, you risk the book being abandoned by the reader. There is a point in Ben's attempt at story telling where you address the delay: *"I guess I'm digressing from Troy's story a little, but well, it is kind of part of it too (26)."* It would be more effective to revise the scene so that, yes, Ben has the opportunity to showboat a little and get everyone's attention, but to also increase the pacing so that the "tease" doesn't cost you the reader's attention.

During the scenes when Troy takes over the story and talks about his encounter with Boss and Slimball, the use of flashback would be a better tactic as opposed to having Troy not only

recount the generalities of the story, but also the dialogue between Boss and himself. People don't recall full conversations as you imply in your story. They remember snippets of dialogue that have struck them in some way, but mostly people paraphrase and that summary of a conversation is based solely on the storyteller's biases. Flashback allows you to stop the present action, hopefully for just a short time, and provide the reader with historical detail that you deem significant. It is a difficult technique to incorporate into a story because it does impact the pace to the point that the reader, when brought back to the present action, may have forgotten what was happening in the scene. WritingClasses.com offers an article entitled [Anatomy of a Flashback](#), which explains the flashback technique and gives advice on implementing it.

The story's lapse into the past also allows for the problem of re-entering into the present action. You rely heavily on back story in this book. What I noticed repeatedly was a failure to transition the reader back into the present after a rather lengthy stroll through a character's past. For example, page 67 ends as follows: *"Like I told you before, finish the job. Got it?"* At the top of page 68, the first line is: *"This guy they called Boss wanted me to become his protégé, his apprentice to kill."* There is no correlation between the two. You end on page 67 with Boss talking to Slimball after pages about their escape and then you open page 68 with Troy still in the middle of a conversation with Matt. At this point, you have been away from Troy's story too long to simply drop your reader back into the scene. Here's a link to a resource that explains the use of transitions in writing: [Transitions and Transitional Devices](#).

While there is an absence of transitions in your story, there is also an overabundance of description. Description in fiction writing is paramount. This technique is how the writer shares his or her vision with the reader. Your description of Matt rescuing Kylie is wonderful. The

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reader can develop images, like a movie playing across the pages, of how Matt and his other animals working as a team to get Kylie to safety. The problem with description occurs when it impacts pacing. There are many characters in this book who are important to the progression of the story, but do not warrant the amount of description you have supplied. For example, you actually stop the forward movement of the story when you introduce El Chicito because you spend quite a bit of time offering detail after detail about his life. Meanwhile, the reader doesn't find out that Matt has been married for forty years until the end of the book. You should provide a considerable amount of description about your lead character(s), but it should not be concentrated on one or two pages. Spread the information out so that the reader is learning something about the character throughout the story.

## STORY PACING

### Strengths:

The pacing in your story improves towards the end of the book when the action is focused on events in the present. There are some scenes at the beginning of the book that exhibit strong pacing. Here's an example from the first chapter:

*There was no reaction to Matt's high-low-high whistle. Not the dog, nor the donkey, mule, or horse made their treat fetching appearance. Matt became worried. He momentarily sensed something was not in order in his valley. He pulled a pair of jeans over his pajama bottoms, threw his ranch coat over his top, grabbed the 308 rifle he kept out of the safe behind the bedroom door, and hurriedly, cautiously went out the pasture facing back door. Looking toward the Aspen first, and then scanning the canyon walls, he saw no animals (13).*

People tend to instinctively slow down when they realize something is not right about their surroundings, and you show this in the pacing of this passage.

## **Weaknesses:**

As stated above, the pacing of your story is adversely affected in several scenes by the incorporation of historical information about your characters and the over use of description. By interrupting the present action with scenes from the past, you stop the momentum occurring in the present. Your challenge during revision will be to condense the back story of your characters so that it can be dispersed throughout the present action, thus moving the story forward as opposed to stopping the action with pages of interruptions.

## **CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT**

### **Strengths:**

Matt is a well-developed character. He doesn't have much to say in the middle of the book, but what you show the reader in terms of his lifestyle and his courage in the beginning and the end of the story, allows the reader to see that he is complicated but also simple. He is the type of character who can be seen as the everyday hero found in any neighborhood in America. Matt is a good guy. Your readers will both identify with him and have concern for him.

Boss is the second best developed character. Even though he is just as evil as Slimball, he is more interesting because he has texture that his sidekick does not. Boss is articulate and can appear to be whatever he needs people to believe he is at any given time. He's also quite smart. These qualities make him all the more dangerous. You succeed with this character because, even

though he is a murderer, you provide his childhood history, which explains why he is the way he is. And there is something about the way he talks to people, especially Troy, that makes him more of a human being than an animal. A villain must have some likable qualities to be effective and you pulled that off with Boss.

### **Weaknesses:**

Slimball is the weakest character, even though he is a significant part of the action and violence in the book. He does not appear human, except in his insecurities. There does not seem to be an explanation of any kind for the longing to hurt and kill that he exhibits throughout the book. There is no depth.

One last point on character development in regards to description. Because your story has multiple characters and sub-plots, you should be frugal in the amount of detail you offer about minor characters. It is not necessary to describe a minor character's physical appearance or history because they just don't have a large role in advancing the story. If, however, you feel that a minor character needs to be described explicitly then perhaps that character should be taking on a larger role in your book.

## GRAMMAR

### Strengths:

For the most part, your grammar was fine. There are some areas in the manuscript that I made note of and prompted you to review in the critique. Please see below.

### Weaknesses:

1. Use of symbols (i.e. =s and @) in the place of the apostrophe and quotations. That appears to have been a mechanical problem because these symbols were not used towards the end of the manuscript. You will need to correct these errors before submitting the book to a publisher or agent.
2. Run-on sentences. Example: *“When scouting, Matt rode across his road from the front of his house diagonally upward and then eastward up and down the catenaries alongside the hill leading to the very top of the massive rock protuberance that from the east looked much like the top part of a gargantuan, dinosaur dwarfing, petrified parrot-fish-head (3).*
3. Wordy, cluttered, or awkward sentences. Example: *“It was likely to stay there as a reminder that procrastinating removing precariously loose rocks from the side of the steep hill above the road could have injurious consequences (2-3).”*
4. Leaving words out of sentences. Example: *“Within few minutes, it would be dark (107).”*

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5. Over use of complicated words. It is important to know your audience and your characters. Question yourself about how they talk and what words they would choose to make a point. Example: *“Maybe the effect of this beer along with the serene, bucolic atmosphere in your valley is making me do it (33).”* This is a statement made by Troy in a conversation with Matt. Are the word choices true to the character’s background and education level?

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## RESOURCES

The following resources will help you with grammar and structure:

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The Elements of Style

<http://www.bartleby.com/141/>

Purdue University Online Writing Lab (OWL)

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/>

This is one of the best sites for finding answers to grammar questions.

## SUMMARY

In its current form, *Peace Comes in Pieces*, is a solid story, but can be made stronger by revising the structure with the use of transitional devices, flashback, and less description of minor characters. As a writer you have to be willing to let go of some of the material you may have collected during your research. Everything you learn is not needed to bring your story to life.

Also, to make your story realistic, have a strong grasp of who your audience will be and the type of people your characters are. Know how they would speak in real life and what would be considered normal behavior for that type of person based on their cultural and educational backgrounds. Read books in the genre you are writing in to get a clearer understanding of how to develop the kinds of characters you want to write about.

When revising your writing, pay special attention to grammar problems, breaking up run-on sentences, and filling in sentences with missing words.

Good luck.

Evaluated by  
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