

Critique  
*Umbrian Day*  
Fiction  
88 pages

## PLOT

### Strengths:

The strongest features of *Umbrian Day* are your descriptions of Italy and the people Giovanna meets as she learns to be an Italian farmer. The pleasure that your protagonist finds while living in Villastrada is vividly depicted. You do a wonderful job of showing the reader what Italy and her people are like. It was both entertaining and educational to read about the daily practices of Italian farmers. Your use of metaphor was also vivid and often interesting: “The question is where does everyone fit in this car? It’s a Fiat Panda the size of a Prada boot box (60).”

You also do a good job of allowing Giovanna to express her love for the people in her new life and the family members she lost in her old life: “There is beauty and love here. Most importantly, there is life. It is time to be grateful, be thankful, and feel the gifts that have been shared. I am in Lena and Nick’s kitchen (26).”

This story has potential.

### Weaknesses:

A story must have conflict. For eighty-seven pages of this manuscript, you have none. Giovanna is portrayed as being excited about her farm and her part-time life in Italy, but the

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reader doesn't find out why she is in Italy until page eighty-eight when you reveal that one of her children passed away. Only then can the many threads you have woven throughout this book be pulled together. It is important that you gradually feed the reader information about your main character from the first sentence, because your reader's attention span is short. If you don't catch her interest from the opening paragraph and hook her during the first five to ten pages, you won't keep her attention.

Page | 2

To maintain your reader's attention you must have a strong plot; well-developed, interesting, and likable characters (even the antagonist must have some redeeming attributes); and well written sentences crafted with the correct use of grammar and punctuation. It is also important to maintain tense throughout your story. You have chosen to move your character in and out of the present and past tense, which means you have to be even more diligent in keeping your tenses straight. For example: When Giovanna is speaking about her current life on the farm, this aspect of the story should be written in the present tense. When she is reminiscing about her childhood and events that occurred in her past life, those passages should be written in the past tense.

You also need to maintain fluidity in your storytelling. The memories that are interjected into the story are interesting and colorful and definitely add to the story, but as they currently appear, it feels as if you are jumping around a lot; pulling together scraps of a past life to build a story. Your story is on page eighty-eight, the second to last paragraph. Giovanna's memories should frame the event that served as the catalyst for her new life as an Italian farmer.

This patching together of memories has also lead to a complete absence of transitions in your story. The use of stream of consciousness when writing about Giovanna's memories breeds

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confusion because you do not prepare the reader in advance. Also, your sentences are, more often than not, incomplete. You leave out words or misuse punctuation such as the dash and the comma to compensate, but it doesn't work.

The confusion extends to the lack of plot. The reader doesn't find out about Giovanna's life before Italy until much later in the story and then only a few things. In order for your reader to identify with your protagonist, you have to give her information in detail and early in the story.

## STORY PACING

### **Strengths:**

The manuscript was weak in this area.

### **Weaknesses:**

I have to base my observations about the pacing on the proliferation of memories that make up the bulk of the story. Often these memories came out of nowhere, so they actually disrupted the pace. Because you did not establish conflict early enough, many of the memories don't appear to advance the action in the story.

## **CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT**

### **Strengths:**

Giovanna is the only partially developed character in this book. She has the potential to be a great character because of her passion for Italy and her great love of family.

### **Weaknesses:**

Giovanna's character is weak in that she is not fully developed. We see Giovanna happy, for the most part. Thus, she is one dimensional. Your protagonist must be broadly developed to be believable and likeable. You should write explicitly about her reaction to her daughter's death. Show your reader what she went through at the onset of her loss then show how the farm in Italy, the friends she gains there, and her childhood memories helped her to heal.

In terms of the secondary characters, you didn't develop them. Because Giovanna was the narrator, the minor characters were not really allowed to have a voice. You can improve the story by including more dialogue that allows the minor characters' personalities and backgrounds to come to the surface. Or switch to third person point-of-view, which will allow you as the writer to narrate the story and to share more information about the minor (and main) characters with the reader.

## GRAMMAR/PUNCTUATION

### Strengths:

The manuscript was also weak in this area.

### Weaknesses:

There were several reoccurring problems with grammar and punctuation in this story:

1. Misuse of punctuation (commas, ellipses, and dashes). Often the dash was preceded by a period, which is incorrect. The dash is used for a dramatic break or pause. You seemed to use the dash in lieu of writing complete sentences. Example: *“The sun patiently awaiting her glory, while the moon gently surrenders the luminosity of the night. -- time a convenience inflicted on humanity -- having it, finding it, losing it, wanting it, never having it -- a man made perception -- the devil’s game (1).”* Refer to *The Elements of Style* (see book list below) for the correct usage of punctuation. Also, please note that the dash should look like this—and not like this --.
2. Run-on sentences. Example: *“There are rules, and they are followed – never in the left lane – with the exception of passing, and the left blinker must remain on until you return to the right lane, headlights must be on, and the minimum speed is 140 km, that is understood, not posted (7).”*
3. Awkward sentences. Example: *“With kisses and laughter, the train pulled away (7).”*

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4. Wordy sentences. Example: “*The pail is to turn on its side, and the rocks scooped in, when the pail can hold nothing more, it is set upright, and taken to the proper location for disposal (15).*”
5. Writing in fragments, not complete sentences.
6. Italian words and their definitions need to consistently appear in italics.
7. Poorly structured sentences. Example: “*Nic always took one of us with him, the tradition would live on, my brother seemed to be responsible for the peppers, Nic the tomatoes, I whatever was left (17).*”
8. Dialogue should be indented as if starting a new paragraph.

## RESOURCES

The following resources will help you with correcting your use of grammar and punctuation:

The Elements of Style

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

The above source is also available in print.

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

As I stated at the beginning of this critique, *Umbrian Day* has potential. There is a lot that can be done to improve this story during the revision process. First, you need to embrace the true story here, which is the death of Giovanna's daughter. Allow the reader to grieve with her and to experience the transformation that leads to her healing. Be considerate of the reader's time by giving her information about your protagonist up front, not on the last pages of the book.

Informing your reader includes writing in clear, precise sentences that are grammatically correct and well punctuated. These are basic skills for a writer. Organization of your story and pacing are also the tools that must be used to capture and hold your reader's interest. Your characters need to be well developed and the reader should be shown all of their layers: grief, passion, fear, joy, resentment, forgiveness, etc. Make them as real and human as possible.

As you shape your story during the revision process, look for words, phrases, and sentences that are unnecessary, redundant or fail to add to the substance or structure of the story. Take them out no matter how much you like them. Incorporating your research or knowledge about Italy is great, but don't get so caught up in these descriptions that you jeopardize the forward movement of your story.

If you are open to a complete re-write of this manuscript, I believe you can create a wonderful story.

Good luck.

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