

Critique: *Lola the Lost Crayon*

Author: Annalee Gannon

Critiquer: Annie Mydla

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Critique summary

Dear Annalee,

Thank you so much for trusting me with the critique of this draft of *Lola the Lost Crayon*. I feel highly privileged to have been able to read the book, both in the 2022 North Street Book Prize and now.

As we discussed in our call, you started out to write a children's picture book, but your final product contains elements of other genres as well, including of chapter books and comic books. I think a keyword for you going forward will be “differentiation”: Teasing out which of your natural go-to ingredients belong in which genre, for which audience, and using which styles and techniques.

Fortunately, you've already proven that you have the talent and drive to complete a project. In fact, as I learned, you're already coming up with new ones! Your ideas are very good, you have experience with storytelling through your scriptwriting, and you lean towards genre fusion, which shows there is a lot of potential for creative development. A good next step could be to invest further in your craft education so you can make informed choices about visual composition, genre identity, and your intended audience - all crucial things an author should keep in mind when seeking commercial success.

To this end, before you embark on further edits of *Lola*, I would suggest doing some research on the following areas: genre expectations for a picture book; planning and executing the visual elements of a picture book, including technical aspects like font, composition density, and flow of information; the craft of the chapter book and whether that might also be an appropriate vehicle for your talents and ideas; and the craft of comics, in case you'd like to get more intentional about incorporating the comics art form into your books. I've listed resources for all of these areas towards the end of the critique.

I am honored to be a part of the development of *Lola the Lost Crayon* and hope that my comments will be helpful in future iterations of the drafting process.

Content and structure

Strength: Compelling main character and themes

I was glad to have the chance to tell you in our call how much I admire the choice of a crayon as a main character. The concept has all the charm of the toys from *Toy Story*, but with an added element of human complexity: Crayons, like people, get "used up". This opens up your universe to many pertinent questions, from the logistical to the existential, including:

- What does happen to crayons that get too short to use comfortably? Does anyone ever really color them completely away?
- How do we, as people, feel when we sense that we are getting "used up"? When the people we love are getting "used up"? How to respond emotionally, psychologically, socially, behaviorally? What do we do next?

In this book in particular, I also admired the following theme about identity and self-esteem:

- What does it do to our self-esteem when we identify using certain words but other people insist on calling us something else that we don't identify with?

In my opinion, the breadth of ideas open to you through the character of Lola make the concept ripe for serialization. Lola could have a different adventure and learn a new lesson in every book. Just food for thought.

Strength: Art style

I also enjoyed your art style and how it changes to fit the moods of the story. A feature I especially liked was how the edges of objects can be soft or hard depending on the tone of the page. There's expressive potential here and I'm excited to see how it develops in future drafts/projects.

Strength: Comic book elements

Another source of potential was the way the design of the pages seemed to lean towards the art form of comics. [Comics for kids are really popular](#), and with your background as a screenwriter, you may already be well equipped to take steps into this genre. Something to think about for the future.

To consider: There's material here for multiple books

As I read, I quickly started to notice the three-act structure we spoke about in our call. Multiple acts are good for a chapter book but are out of place in a picture book for younger readers. Typically, a picture book will focus on just one main situation or problem; when that one situation is resolved, the book concludes.

That's not to say your three acts are bad - far from it! I am just pointing out that from a genre perspective, they might not all belong in the same book. It might be a good idea to explore separating each of the three acts into its own book. I could see the split going something like this:

Book 1: The See What You Color gameshow

Book 2: The misidentification lilac/purple issue

Book 3: The discarded crayon plot

Moreover, splitting up the current manuscript into three books could be a great way to give yourself the freedom to tinker with writing for different age groups. Book 1, about See What You Color, seems to me to be geared for younger audiences who are still learning about colors, shapes, the names of animals, etc. Books 2 and 3 could be for slightly older children who are ready to learn about issues of identity, self-esteem, loneliness, unknowns in the future, and mortality.

Language

To consider: Inconsistent punctuation

The language used seems to be appropriate for younger readers - good job. I was concerned about some incorrect punctuation, however, as on page 8 ("Hello crayon-testants welcome to the show." – the sentence is missing a comma; then on page 10, "Up on the board there will be two drawings and one mystery drawing" is missing a period). Correctness in language and punctuation is really important for kids just learning to read and spell. Parents and teachers need to be sure that what the kids are seeing on the page is supporting what kids learn at home and at school.

Layout and technical elements

To consider: Font can be difficult to read

Along with the genre/intended readership issue, there were technical problems with the current draft which would be good to address in the future. One of these technical problems was the font. It can be hard to read at times, both due to its fuzziness and the fact that it tends to blend into the background on some pages, like on page 7 and on all the pages with Gio. Additionally, the font can be hard to read just due to how it looks, like on page 10 and 12 in the speech bubbles, where it's cramped and too small. Spacing between lines was also sometimes irregular, which can make pages look messy. Page 11 is an example.

Remember, although picture books are meant for children to enjoy, adults are the ones who must read them out loud (and decide which to buy in the first place!) Moreover, older parents, grandparents, and teachers may not have the best eyesight. It's good to keep adults' reading comfort in mind as you design and create a picture book.

To consider: Flow of information is sometimes unclear

Another technical issue for me was the fact that it's not always clear how the text is supposed to flow on each page. For example, on page 12, the Brown crayon is responding to something Lola said, but since our eye is traveling from left to right, we see Brown's comment before we see Lola's. This makes it confusing, as we are not sure what Brown means before we get closer to the end of the line of crayons.

In the future, it might be good to do some research into the fundamentals of page composition, especially "leading the viewer's eye". Here are a few videos and articles to get you started thinking about key concepts:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fENrhRBFS_I

<https://oldmatemedia.com/guides/art-and-text-layout-design-ideas/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FOFcbqQ1IwU>

To consider: Pages contain too much information and too many transitions for the genre

One of the most important growth areas in this draft was the sheer amount of information on each page. As I said above, children's picture books are meant to focus on only one situation or issue at a time; similarly, each page should itself contain only one thought or idea - one small "step" in the narrative.

Different genres have different requirements for this. In comics or chapter books, for example, the information on a page can be denser and more complex. In a picture book for early readers, though, it can be better to leave more space around each idea, both visually and textually, so that the child can digest the concepts one step at a time.

In future drafts of this and other children's book projects, it might be beneficial to design each page so that the main idea of the page is always obvious. If you chafe at this idea, then it could indicate that a genre for slightly older kids, like comics or chapter books, might be a better vehicle for your talents and ideas.

*Author questions: Do I have to have quotes for everything? When addressing the "All About Me" worksheet is it *All About Me*? Was changing the font when addressing the show "See What you Color" or a "thought" a character had necessary or correct?*

I grouped all these questions together because I sense they all have a similar root: As a screenwriter, you have ample experience with the demands of one medium of storytelling, but you might not be as confident when it comes to the requirements of children's lit. I recommend taking a course or two on the basics before advancing on to new projects. You'll have more options and confidence afterwards and be able to make more informed choices about your compositions. Here's a list of online courses at various price points to get started with:

<https://www.domestika.org/en/courses/2214-visual-narrative-for-picturebooks-create-a-playful-world/course>

<https://www.domestika.org/en/courses/930-picturebook-creation>

<https://www.domestika.org/en/courses/1709-creation-of-a-children-s-picturebook>

<https://www.curtisbrowncreative.co.uk/course/writing-a-childrens-picture-book>

<https://www.udemy.com/course/writing-picture-books/>

<https://www.writerscentre.com.au/store/courses/writing-picture-books/>

<https://www.coursera.org/learn/writing-for-children#syllabus>

<https://blog.reedsy.com/learning/courses/writing/childrens-books-right-age/>

<https://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/exploring-books-children-words-and-pictures/content-section-0?active-tab=content-tab>

<https://www.bbcmastro.com/courses/julia-donaldson/writing-children-s-picture-books>

<https://www.childrensbookacademy.com/cbwpb21.html>

<https://www.writersonlineworkshops.com/courses/writing-the-picture-book>

To consider: Exploring genres for slightly older children; investigating the potential of comics in your compositions

As we discussed in our talk, your predilection for using complex ideas, dense visual compositions, and lots of text might mean that your talents could be leading you towards a genre for slightly older children. We were talking about Dav Pilkey as someone who had successfully combined text and comics in works for older children and tweens.

I definitely recommend reading this article in order to get a better understanding of which genres tend to go with which age groups:

<https://getyourbookillustrations.com/understanding-childrens-books-age-groups/>

It might also be a good idea to read this article describing the differences between picture books and story picture books (for slightly older readers):

<https://champannessie.com/2019/12/11/story-book-vs-picture-book/>

The *Captain Underpants* series is a children's chapter book with comics elements, so it might be fruitful to investigate the craft of the chapter book. Some articles/courses to look at might include:

<https://thejohnfox.com/2019/02/how-to-write-a-childrens-book/>

<https://www.childrensbookacademy.com/the-chapter-book-alchemist.html>

<https://www.writerscentre.com.au/store/courses/writing-chapter-books-for-6-9-year-olds/>

<https://www.udemy.com/course/how-to-write-a-great-childrens-book/>

Finally, in the future, it might be interesting for you to explore using the comics format more intentionally, for example by using panels to divide the page and guide the action. Any of these articles about making comics for kids might make interesting reading:

<https://www.hbook.com/story/picture-books-books-graphic-elements>

<https://www.scholastic.com/content/dam/teachers/lesson-plans/18-19/Graphic-Novel-Discussion-Guide-2018.pdf>

<https://creativitieschool.com/how-to-make-comics-for-kids/>

As well as the following online courses:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QKoHEa79UO0>

<https://www.classcentral.com/course/make-comic-books-5712>

<https://www.coursera.org/learn/make-comic-books#syllabus>

***Lola the Lost Crayon* and the North Street Book Prize**

I'd like to thank you again for giving me the opportunity to send you my observations about *Lola the Lost Crayon*. It made an impression on me when I read it originally and I'm glad to be able to be in touch with you about it now. I went back in my notes and found my assessment from the contest:

"Despite the clever use of crayons to communicate important themes of identity for young readers, the overall execution was weakened by crowded pages, hard-to-read font, confusing flow of information, and an over-full storyline. I would have been more inclined to advance the

book to the later rounds of judging had the composition as a whole been better tuned to the Children's Picture Book genre category in which the book was competing."

For what it's worth, *Lola the Lost Crayon* made First Cut in the 2022 North Street Book Prize. That means out of 1,946 entries, it was in the top 446 (percentage-wise, that means the top 23%).

Recommendations

The main assets of the current manuscript are its compelling main character and themes, the art style, and the comic book elements. However, as discussed, technical matters like hard-to-read font, confusing flow of information, over-full pages, and ambiguity in the genre and intended readership are all keeping the book from being as great as it could be. Splitting the current draft into three separate books might be one way to reduce the information-pressure on each individual page, allowing each story to spread over a relatively greater number of pages. Going forward, I would certainly recommend investing time and energy in research, as well as a course or two, on the craft of the picture book, the craft of comics, and the genre potentialities of books for slightly older readers, for example the chapter book.

Exercises

1. Go through the lists of online courses, videos, and articles above. Take/watch/read at least one on each of the following subjects:
 - a. Genre by age group
 - b. The craft of the picture book
 - c. The craft of the chapter book
 - d. The craft of comics
 - e. Page composition: Leading the eye

2. Journal on what a new draft of *Lola the Lost Crayon* might look like if it used the following criteria:
 - a. Includes only one of the three main acts from the current draft
 - b. Focuses on one idea per page
 - c. Has a clear flow of visual and textual information, leading the eye
 - d. Uses an easy-to-read font that always stands out from the background
 - e. All text, content, and images are geared towards the target age group
 - f. Keeps the visual needs of parents, grandparents, and teachers in mind