

Title: [Redacted]

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Critique summary

Dear [Redacted],

Thank you so much for trusting me with the critique of this draft of [redacted]. I'm glad for the chance to express my admiration for the documentary-style details, descriptions of physiological states, and physicality, spatiality, movement, and sensory detail. I also saw opportunities to increase agent-friendliness, like beefing up narrative emphasis and giving the book as a whole stronger long-, medium-, and short-term questions to keep readers curious and turning pages. This critique will go into all of these topics and provide resources to address them if desired. I'll close with a summary of recommendations and some exercises for inspiration.

Before I begin, I'd like to be up front about some fundamental positions this critique will be taking. All market-friendly memoirs have a structure of escalating tension and release that culminates in a climax before winding down with falling action and resolution. Agents who don't feel that pattern in their gut won't have a satisfying reading experience. In contrast, the composition priorities of early-career authors tend to be primarily social: authenticity, rawness, telling the truth, self-expression and "giving the full picture". That creates a conflict when the book comes in front of agents, who will reflexively reject books that don't have escalating tension and release.

From my perspective, it seems that the draft you've submitted has not yet taken up escalating tension and release as a composition priority. For example, your submission notes ask whether more background is necessary for a full picture and contrast the idea of a full picture with a fragmented picture. But the fact is, it's not desirable for any memoir with commercial aspirations to give a full picture. At a gut level, agents and readers alike want a book with selective scope, clear narrative emphasis, and above all, escalating tension and release. The latter is the minimum craft requirement for commercial success. From your book's other strengths, I'd say you'll be able to accomplish this, but it might take a mindset change.

Some aspiring memoirists write back to say that prioritizing escalating tension and release is not for them. It's easy to be sensitive to their point of view if their goals are not commercial. But since you specify that you want agent attention, I wouldn't be doing my job if I was less than clear about the importance of escalating tension and release. If you find yourself feeling conflicted, this article discusses some of the psychological complications for early career authors about adopting the tension and release mindset: <https://winningwriters.com/resources/my-book-isnt-selling-but-a-market-friendly-version-wouldnt-be-mine>

As with your previous book, I am honored to be a part of the development of [redacted]. I hope that my comments will be helpful as you continue the drafting process.

General strengths

As you read my comments, keep in mind that I already found interest and value in the manuscript as it exists today. One of my favorite parts was the documentary-style details like the unasked-for outreach from strangers (the girl scout cards on page 30 and the Cancer Society calls on pages 51-52) and having to get the childhood vaccines again on page 92. I was also impressed by the vivid descriptions of internal physiological experiences of treatment (like the taste of the saline mixture on page 20 and the fentanyl on page 98) and treatment-related challenges (the blood clot on pages 35-37, the nose bleed on pages 69-71, and Chapter 14, “Sepsis”). Physicality, spatiality, settings, sensory detail, and movement are excellent throughout. Your craft has clearly advanced since the book I previously critiqued.

Most importantly from my point of view, there are already instances of tension and release in this draft. For example, going home on page 25 is a source of release before tension starts again on page 35 with the “first hiccup”. The end of Chapter 5 also has a good sense of release with you feeling good and eating well. Then, in Chapter 6, the tension ramps up again with the mention of the transplant. Great work. As with the previous book, a stronger sense of narrative emphasis and escalating tension and release will be needed to attract agents from a craft and commercial standpoint. But the presence of at least some tension and release in this draft makes me optimistic that you’ll be able to get this book into the shape agents need in order to feel confident about representation.

Topic: Target audience (TA)

To consider: Lack of clarity on target audience may be driving some core problems with drafting and editing

Your submission questions show concern about issues linked to target audience. Very perceptive. We are on the same page. I want to get into TA right away because it’s a problem that also underlines other issues in this draft.

The way the book is written right now, I’m tempted to say that men over 60 are the target audience. The themes feel masculine and mid-1900s with “never waste a crisis”, “keep your chin up”, the impulse to hide problems from others until they are solved (pages 29 and 70), and the strategy of keeping difficulties manageable using humor, a fast pace, and self-help/philosophy bites. The online and therapy-oriented generations, like Millennials and Gen Z, may not be so on board with those outlooks. Meanwhile, female figures in this draft have little interiority, with their actions and words interpreted by the male narrator, which could make it harder for women to connect. If “older men” feels right to you for a target audience, you might want to lean into it

in future drafts. It could help you answer some of the questions you've been on the fence about. If you seek a wider audience that also includes women, the approach might need to change.

Why get specific with target audience? Your submission notes characterize your TA as "a general reading audience", but although I can see the temptation of that mindset, it's not very realistic or practical if your aim is market success (<https://fitcatinc.com/writing/your-book-is-not-for-everyone>). You yourself have felt the difficulty of writing for "a general audience" through the impossibility of answering the questions about the nurses/techs and the book's sense of humor. It's just not a good yardstick to measure potential decisions against. A more specific TA is a much better yardstick.

In fact, a more specific TA is a better yardstick for just about every composition question there is. A few of them include:

Scope: What would my TA want to be in this book? What would they want to be taken out of this book?

Narrative emphasis: Of the things I choose to keep in my book, what is this TA going to want to see played up? Played down? How can I make sure the word count is mostly spent on the things that will absorb them the most?

Page-turning energy: What in this book will most boost this TA's curiosity and pleasure? What will contribute most to escalating tension and release?

Does the need for a strong specific target audience for a book mean that your personal, real-life story is not valuable for people in general? Absolutely not. What you went through is really important for its own sake, and anyone who cares about you will value getting the whole picture. As a person, I value the whole picture. That's the personal/social side of the writing activity. But when we turn to the craft/commercial side of writing, this critique is not actually talking about "your story" as a personal or social thing. It's talking about a commercial product, the book. Getting an agent means writing down a version of your story that is selective about what it says and why, in order to give a particular target audience a particular kind of experience.

More about target audience, with practical tips for deciding on who they are and how to engage them in your book: <http://archive.today/W6va2>

Topic: Narrative emphasis

To consider: Agents prefer manuscripts with higher narrative emphasis

This MS still feels like an early draft to me, and one of the big reasons for that is lack of narrative emphasis: all the material seems to receive more or less the same focus. That makes it hard to know what the book is “about” beyond the general premise of getting treated for cancer, staying positive, and wanting to support readers who are going through something similar. Hard to differentiate between this book and other books about having cancer. Agents don’t like that. They like to feel in their gut that they’re not just reading a story about cancer but encountering a more specific angle on the topic than they ever have before.

There’s a lot in this book that agents tend to see a lot, including advice about stoicism, gratitude, and catching cancer early, a Covid backdrop that’s not fully fleshed out, a supportive wife character that’s not really fleshed out either, themes like “keep your chin up” and “never waste a crisis”, and more. Agents may well be turned off by the lack of specificity. The fact that there’s little narrative emphasis on any one particular part could be a double-whammy turn-off.

If you really want to attract agent attention, then one of the most important things you could do for this book right now is decide on what your narrative emphasis is going to be. What to drill down into, deeply explore, zoom in on. What to amplify (<https://www.planetpark.in/creative-writing/amplification-meaning>) and what to tone down. Remember, a book is what is on the page (<https://winningwriters.com/resources/a-book-is-what-is-on-the-page>) in a very literal sense. Whatever takes up most of the word count is what the book is really about.

If you decide to strengthen your narrative emphasis, I would recommend focusing in on a part of the story that agents are less familiar with and more likely to be curious about. Candidates for me included:

The experience of having cancer (probably desirable to zoom in on just one of these items as a main narrative focus rather than giving them all the same weight)

- Drugs and altered states (as in places like the bathroom episode on page 117, infection and the sepsis episode, Granix on page 79, chemo tics on page 75, Granix, Claritin, and chemo-head on page 32, bone pain on page 31). Your submission notes asked, “I think my history of drugs and alcohol is pertinent to character building and perspective. Just wondering if it is too much? Too little?” That depends. Is the book about drugs, altered states, and cancer treatment? Then it needs more about all substances, including your history with drugs and alcohol. Is the book about something else? Then prune that material back.
- Rule-following while getting crucial medical treatment when you’re not a good rule-follower from page 34

- Unasked-for interactions with strangers like receiving calls from previous cancer patients and their loved ones (page 49), the get well cards from strangers (page 30), and prayers from others (page 27)
- The whole idea of “drawstring life” (page 55)
- The problem with the concept of remission (page 41)
- Transplants: getting them and deciding not to get them; what it’s like when a doctor disagrees with a big decision like not getting one

Social/political commentary

- The insurance conflict from page 24 onwards and its political associations
- Cancer treatment during Covid (operates in the background of the current draft)
- The IV trash on page 13 (tie-in with waste, environmentalism,

The healthcare providers’ side of things (though I’m less inclined towards this option because it has less to do with your personal experience)

- Doctors’ descriptions of what is to come for patients are often not accurate, because they haven’t experienced them firsthand, only through patients’ accounts (pages 31-32)
- Crossover between hospital logistics and other kinds of logistics, like pandemic logistics (page 53) and real estate logistics (page 41), as well as hospital logistics generally (toilet malfunction on page 60)

In the current draft’s treatment, all of these things are kind of mixed together in the order they happened/you encountered them. The pacing is so fast that there’s no chance for the story to really dig into any of them. Drilling down into just one of these groups of things, or preferably, just one of the items within one of the groups of things, would be more market-friendly. Some of the things that feel very vague and general to me in the current draft (like the Covid backdrop) might well become fascinating if zoomed in with full context, more information, more contradictions/complications, more foundation.

Your submission notes asked about the end of the book. Generally, I was less interested in the self-help content/advice, which is of the kind I often see in manuscripts and North Street Book Prize submissions, and which agents ceaselessly see in their slush piles. The advice might work if this book was actually structured as a self-help book, with a narrative emphasis on self-help. As a memoir, though, the advice feels not all that unique or interesting, and also feels kind of tossed in at the end in place of a real resolution (i.e., resolution to the core story with escalating tension and release). I might feel differently about the advice if the book had a full tension and release arc from cover to cover as well as the advice, or if the book had a more specific narrative

emphasis so that the advice being given was about that interesting, narrow slice of experience, like drawstring life, following rules that your life depends on as someone not good at following rules, or the physiological experiences of treatment drugs.

Back to author psychology for a minute: as we know, early-career authors are often concerned with the ideas of giving the full picture and expressing themselves. They ask, “What do I want to convey?” “How can I show the whole story?” and make content choices based on that. That can lead to a draft that feels more like an idea salad than a market-friendly book. As you move forward, don’t fall into that trap.

The market-friendly attitude is different. Authors writing for agent submissions ask, “What part of this story can I zoom in on to maximize satisfaction and interest for my target audience?” “What can I put here to make good on my TA’s expectations for escalating tension and release?” Strong narrative emphasis coupled with awareness of the target audience’s needs makes agents feel in their gut that the book they’re reading is “a real book”.

Going forward, I suggest doing some soul searching about writing for a narrower target audience and how a narrower TA might help your choices about narrative emphasis. Ask yourself questions like:

1. If my TA is x, how will y content make them feel?
2. Will TA x be interested in content y, or will it seem peripheral/redundant/obvious/boring to them?
3. What part of my draft’s word count might already be interesting to TA x? How can I recompose the other parts to be more interesting to them?

Suggested craft resources:

1. <https://nickmacari.com/dramatic-narrative-emphasis/>
2. <http://blog.janicehardy.com/2011/10/and-pretty-words-all-in-row-tightening.html>
3. <https://annerallen.com/2012/01/how-to-write-publishable-memoir-12-dos/>

To consider: A more specific premise could help find narrative emphasis

The vagueness of the current premise might be hurting the book’s ability to emphasize certain parts over others. Here is the description of the premise from the submission notes:

Story of having and being treated for cancer, staying positive, life lessons

While this description is correct in that the book is indeed about cancer treatment, staying positive, and life lessons, it's too wide and general to attract agents or be practical as a yardstick for deciding where the book's narrative emphasis lies. Developing a more specific premise could help you stay focused on a smaller body of main ideas in the next stage of drafting. Target audience is essential to keep in mind as you develop a sharper premise.

Resources like these could help:

- 1) <https://www.writingmastery.com/blog/what-is-a-story-premise-a-guide-to-your-story-s-foundation>
- 2) <https://www.derbyshirewritingschool.com/blog/what-is-a-novel-premise-and-how-to-create-a-good-one>
- 3) <https://literarydevices.net/premise/>
- 4) <https://thewritepractice.com/premise-definition/>

To consider: Stronger narrative emphasis might make it easier to pick a title

Your submission notes mentioned trouble with the title. I agree that *[redacted]* is not the best choice. It's too general and broad to attract agents' interest. Additionally, the word "chronicles" is associated with longer time periods and wider casts, so it might set reader expectations it doesn't end up making good on. None of the title alternatives at the end of the draft stood out especially positively.

If no good title is surfacing for you, it might very well be due to lack of narrative emphasis. A draft that zeroes in on a particular piece of your experience might offer up more in the way of concrete, specific images and phrases for titles. Until that happens, I'm not in the position to offer title suggestions.

To consider: Adding "B matter" could enhance both emphasis and word count

Another factor to consider when thinking about narrative emphasis is what memoirists call "B matter": supporting context that enriches the primary plotline. Normally, B matter serves as a buffer between plot points to prevent the narrative from becoming monotonous ("a' happened, then 'b' happened, then 'c' happened..."). It also acts as connective tissue between the readers and the story by clarifying what the common ground is and then exploring it. Agents expect at a gut level that in a memoir, about a quarter of the word count will be B matter.

B matter can also enhance narrative emphasis. If, just for instance, your narrative emphasis was on the physiological experiences of street drugs and treatment drugs and their impact on your identity and other people's perceptions of you, B matter could be dedicated to something related

to, but slightly outside, the main plot, like: historical background about the drugs used to treat cancer and any recreational or other uses they may have had, underlying social or philosophical questions relating to social perceptions of identity while on drugs in the contexts of addiction versus treatment for a serious illness; or perhaps even artistic questions about the challenges of portraying uncommon physiological states or the subtle and not so subtle changes in the cancer patient's relationships during periods of addiction to street drugs vs during medical treatment.

B matter can also have a positive effect on word count. Your submission notes asked whether the current length of about 38k words would be sufficient. In my opinion, no. Agents would be more likely to pay attention to a book of normal memoir length, about 60-80k words. B matter could help expand the word count while supporting, not diluting, narrative focus. For example, in a memoir of 70k, supportive B matter exploration might make up about 17k.

Suggested craft resources:

1. <https://brevity.wordpress.com/2024/07/19/deep-memoir/>
2. <https://stephanieduncansmith.substack.com/p/how-to-write-memoir-that-makes-room>
3. <https://www.helpingwritersbecomeauthors.com/write-your-memoir-like-a-novel/> (Item 1)
4. <https://janefriedman.com/build-narrative-arc-memoir/>
5. <https://writingcooperative.com/a-simple-trick-to-cultivate-your-own-unique-angle-as-a-writer-3faabdb1515>
6. <https://www.writersdigest.com/improve-my-writing/find-an-angle-to-bring-your-subject-to-life>

Topic: Page-turning energy

To consider: The book needs a climax

While I valued the heart and sense of humor in this submission, the plot transitions too quickly from rising action to resolution. Chapter 14, "Sepsis", seemed like it had potential to be a climax, but the pacing is as fast as the rest of the book, and there's not as much of a sense of jeopardy as there could be. It feels more like an extension of the rising action than a catalyst the book has been building to. The expectation for market-friendly memoir is a more pronounced climax (<https://www.thewritersforhire.com/does-my-autobiography-memoir-need-a-narrative-arc/>).

When I give this kind of feedback, some authors have answered that it was their intention to move directly from rising action to falling action. They may respond that their goal was realism, and that in life, not all problems culminate in a climax. Some resolve by themselves over time. Some never resolve. That approach can backfire, though, as market-friendly memoirs need a

climax to succeed. Readers are reading for a feeling of escalating tension and release in their gut, and agents know that.

When choosing your climax, make sure it corresponds with the source of your narrative emphasis. You can even use your climax to reverse-engineer your narrative emphasis. For example, if your climax is the sepsis episode, perhaps the book's main narrative emphasis is about contamination, altered states, and the shades of impossibility of using words to communicate, whether due to illness (pages 111-112, "I directed a sentence toward Ellen, who was worried and waiting for answers, but I realized that it wasn't coming together") or to the speaker or listener's lack of personal experience (doctors not being good at describing what certain treatments feel like). On the other hand, if you choose a different narrative emphasis, maybe the climax needs to be different, too.

Suggested craft resources:

1. <https://www.helpingwritersbecomeauthors.com/write-your-memoir-like-a-novel/> (Item 1)
2. <https://janefriedman.com/build-narrative-arc-memoir/>
3. <http://blog.janicehardy.com/2021/04/story-structure-how-climax-works-in.html>
4. <https://kindlepreneur.com/climax-of-a-story/>
5. <https://nathanbransford.com/blog/2019/06/how-to-write-a-good-climax-in-a-novel>
6. <https://blog.bookbaby.com/how-to-write/good-writing-habits/how-to-write-a-story-climax>
7. <https://thewritersally.com/articles/how-to-end-a-story-three-ways-to-nail-your-books-ending/>

To consider: Building reader curiosity in the long-term of the book

If you want to get an agent, a key developmental step can be to make sure that the book gives readers sources of curiosity in the short, medium, and long term. For example, your book already has good medium-term sources of curiosity with Granix (pages 31-84ish) and short-term with the blood clot on pages 35-37. However, market-friendly books usually have denser and more intensive sources of curiosity in the short, medium, and long term, and I would like to comment on a few ways you might be able to achieve that in a future draft or project.

Long-term sources of curiosity are often what writers are referring to when they talk about "structure". Developmentally speaking, reader-friendly, marketable books tend to try and raise multiple specific questions for readers in the exposition, touch upon those questions from time to time in the rising action, have them come to a head in the book's climax, and then resolve them in the falling action and resolution.

While I appreciated how your exposition raised questions about what might happen to you during treatment and what it's like to undergo treatment for cancer, I also thought these questions might be a bit too general, inconcrete, and commonly seen to act as the main engines of curiosity across the entire book. They might raise stronger curiosity if they were more specific, concrete, and less commonly seen. For example, along with "What will happen to Tom during treatment?" (a general question suggested by page 12, "So, is this treatable? Do you expect me to survive?"), a market-friendly book would also plant questions having to do with the subject of a more specific narrative emphasis.

For example, if the topics of narrative emphasis you chose were, say, your marriage, dealing with other people's reactions to your cancer, and drugs, physiological experiences of drugs, and social perceptions of drug use in addiction vs treatment contexts, then it would be advisable to develop strong reader questions about all of those things in Chapter 1. For example, your mother warns against addiction to laxatives on page 30, but the moment is fleeting in the current draft, and her worries about you and addiction are not revisited in the book. Planting an earlier, stronger question about your mother's worries about you coming back into contact with strong substances during the course of treatment and not resolving that concern until the end could help readers feel anxious about the same for the entire duration of the book.

While reading this draft, I wanted more concrete questions. I also wanted, simply, more questions. A good practice is usually to have at least one strong question for every central aspect of the story. The lack of narrative emphasis in this version makes it hard for me to say what the central aspects are or suggest questions. Brainstorming questions for core elements might be a good activity to do once you have narrowed your target audience and source of emphasis.

The following resources give concrete suggestions on how to give readers questions and build their curiosity:

- 1) <https://www.septembercfawkes.com/2019/08/reeling-readers-in-via-curiosity.html>
- 2) <https://writershelpingwriters.net/2018/01/three-powerful-techniques-harness-readers-curiosity/>
- 3) <https://nownovel.com/how-to-start-a-novel/>
- 4) <https://www.amazon.com/Wired-Story-Writers-Science-Sentence/dp/1607742454>
- 5) <https://janefriedman.com/the-importance-of-curiosity-and-tension-to-storytelling/>
- 6) <http://blog.janicehardy.com/2015/01/avoiding-awkward-or-unnecessary.html>
- 7) <https://fictionistas.substack.com/p/creating-tension-in-fiction-and-memoir>
- 8) <https://winningwriters.com/resources/page-turning-energy-keeping-readers-curious>

To consider: Building curiosity in the medium term

This book could also be making better and more frequent use of medium-term questions. By medium-term, I mean questions that extend across about three to several chapters in the rising action. Medium-term questions often resolve before the climax, and their function is to help the rising action feel, well, “rising”, building, as opposed to episodic and flat.

Like many early manuscripts, this draft resolves most problems too quickly to let interest develop. One example is on page 48 with the issue of how your work is going to get covered while you’re hospitalized. That problem felt high-stakes to me because I’m a freelancer, and I looked forward to how it would develop. However, the problem is downplayed in the draft (“Being a self-employed realtor, during a pandemic in which (most) people were too afraid to leave the house let alone have their homes toured by possible infectants, the problem was less of a problem”) and then immediately resolved in the next paragraph (“My managing broker hooked me up with a newer agent, Gregory”). No time for any curiosity or tension to develop even in the short term, let alone medium.

A helpful strategy when thinking about medium-term questions is “running a plot in background mode”. You set up the question, for example, by establishing that you’re not sure how much work you’ll be able to do if hospitalized. Then you change the subject for a few chapters, perhaps giving an update or two on how the medium-term question is developing. The question “runs in background mode” in the reader’s mind while the book is ostensibly focused on other things, raising tension through the new “foreground mode” topics at the same time. For example, in the case of finding you a work replacement, you could set up the question in, say, Chapter 2 before the first round of chemo, change the subject to getting the first round of chemo, continue through Chapter 3 with a small update about still wondering about the work question, and only then come back to resolve the issue through the discovery of Gregory on page 48. Medium-term curiosity established.

Successful memoirs will generally have several overlapping medium-term questions operating at once throughout the rising action. When one resolves, others are still humming along in background mode, keeping up the tension against the longer-term questions that span the entire book. That eliminates episodicity and keeps readers feeling pulled along. As you move forward in learning how to deploy developmental editing techniques, a step you might incorporate into your process could be identifying potential sources of medium-term curiosity and planning when and how to introduce and resolve them.

The book already has a few medium-term questions. One good example is how you handle Granix. Page 31 establishes that “It wouldn’t be until months later that I would forget my Claritin and find out how very inaccurate ‘bone pain’ was as a description of that consequence,” then page 82 makes good on the bone pain promise. A few Granix mentions in between keep the issue simmering. I loved that. The Allo transplant question (pages 45-122) was another good one. A

market-friendly version of this book would have the “set, simmer, and deploy” pattern more intensively throughout the rising action.

A word on theme and medium-term questions before I move on. Too-quick resolution doesn’t just kill medium-term questions; it kills theme development. For example, there’s some philosophical content in the book, like the Camus reference on page 109. But since the pace is so fast, the premise of the book is so broad, there is so little narrative emphasis, and individual episodes are resolved so quickly, the philosophical ideas don’t really have anything to explore or dig into. They’re forced to stay surfacey as your next paragraph moves onto something else right away. Sticking with each problem for a longer could mean sticking with themes for longer, too, giving them time to develop.

This article by Janet Hardy gives concrete tips on designing overlapping medium-term arcs: <http://blog.janicehardy.com/2015/04/create-more-story-depth-with-mini-arcs.html>

To consider: Building curiosity at the chapter and scene level

Short-term curiosity is established at the chapter, scene, paragraph, and sentence levels. Chapters and scenes have their own arcs that create, develop, and resolve reader questions. A good example of an arc within a chapter was the blood clot “hiccup” on pages 35-37, with its onset, you alerting Ellen, going to the clinic, the image on the screen providing a high point/climax, then falling action/resolution of the problem leading to the closing of the chapter.

You could strengthen arcs in practically every chapter and scene in this version. This draft had many lightning-quick episodes resolve in less than a page, like the BMB on page 3 and the allergic reaction with the platelets on pages 80-81 (ironic, considering that the narration says, “My allergies developed over time.”) These brief episodes have the potential to be interesting, but at the moment they feel a little scrapbooky to me, like these are things you want the reader to know about but haven’t yet committed to really fleshing out the way agents expect in their gut: the way that contributes to narrative momentum.

As you go edit at the level of chapter and scene, I would recommend getting more intentional about not just “putting something in” to the book, but making sure it has an arc to initiate, raise, climax, and resolve curiosity.

It can be helpful to imagine that anything you simply present to the reader and move on from is like a dead weight they then have to carry as they read on. It’s the literary equivalent of handing one of your belongings to someone and saying, “Here, do something with this”. Then you hand them a second, different belonging. And a third. It kills momentum. Make whatever it is pull its

own weight by pulling readers forward in an arc of curiosity on the micro scale as well as the macro.

Suggested craft resources:

1. <https://www.thenovelry.com/blog/how-to-write-a-scene>
2. <https://www.deeplore.show/pacing-tension-structures/>
3. <https://mystorydoctor.com/mastering-pacing-how-to-control-momentum-across-acts-and-chapters/>
4. <https://www.ptmichelle.com/2011/10/21/writing-tips-mini-story-arcs-within-your-storys-arc/>
5. <https://nybookeditors.com/2019/12/how-to-write-a-chapter/>
6. <https://storyloft.app/what-is-a-chapter/>
7. <https://prowritingaid.com/structure-novel-chapter>
8. <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/how-to-start-a-chapter>
9. <https://www.deeplore.show/pacing-tension-structures/>

To consider: Building curiosity at the line level

Curiosity at the paragraph and sentence level is also something I wanted to mention. I'm a developmental editor, not a line editor, but I consider that the mindset of "How is my word choice here going to raise or resolve reader curiosity?" is a developmental skill because it can make writers more effective from the very first draft.

Early-career authors are prone to revealing too much too soon in their paragraphs and sentences. Simply changing the wording of certain content can pull readers forward more effectively. Imagine an exposition in which we learn, "Sarah hadn't been outside in ten years because of anxiety from childhood trauma". Okay, story told. No need to read further. But now imagine a version that creates questions: "Sarah was nervous about being in full sunlight. What should she wear? She'd long since outgrown the coats and shoes she'd used back then." The second version raises questions about why Sarah hadn't been outside in so long, exactly how long it's been, and what happened to make her stay inside. Readers need to keep reading if they want to learn why. If you want to know more about how to create this effect on a line level, the keyword to search is "subtext".

In your book, I noticed that paragraphs and sentences mostly left the potential for subtext by the wayside. For example, on page 87, the delivery made me feel like I already had all the information I needed about your lunch with Janet "I was excited to catch up, to socialize, to take another step toward normalcy, to choose a dish from a non-hospital menu. But there was a disquiet as well. Sitting face to face with a friend I'd barely texted with for the endurance of my

ordeal. She was prone to disappearances in life, self-imposed exiles, which didn't bother me any or offend, but it made for heavier than necessary reunions." Clear enough! No curiosity needed.

I felt the same about the calls on page 52: "He'd been roughly my age when his experience went down. He was 5 years in remission and brimming with positivity. He was encouraging in that it was a miserable experience to go through, and the isolation afterwards was difficult, but that in no time he was back to his life and had been happy and healthy since." My curiosity was satisfied, slowing the narrative momentum like the literary equivalent of a speed bump. That happened a lot on the line level in this draft. Using subtext instead of spelling the dynamics out would have sharpened my curiosity and, by extension, my desire to read on.

Once authors discover subtext, it can become tempting to apply it to everything, to try to make readers curious about everything. But that leads to "idea salad" just as much as no questions at all. When you line edit, keep narrative emphasis in mind: emphasize things relating to your core material, and deemphasize other things. For example, if the narrative emphasis in this book turns out to be the uneasy social landscape of being a cancer patient, extend and amplify the Janet episode and the phone calls with survivors and their loved ones. If it's about something else, play them down or take them out.

Suggested craft resources:

1. <https://winningwriters.com/resources/using-subtext-to-add-depth-to-a-scene>
2. <https://thewritingking.com/subtext/>
3. <https://fictionalfixation.com/2026/05/04/how-to-write-powerful-subtext-in-fiction-without-saying-it-out-loud/>
4. <https://www.writersrelief.com/what-is-subtext-and-why-should-you-write-it-writers-relief/>
5. <https://brilliantiobooks.com/how-to-use-subtext-in-writing/>

To consider: Becoming more aware of sources of "bad tension" and creating long- and medium-term questions to channel readers' curiosity

A significant side benefit of consciously developing long- medium-, and short-term questions is how it channels reader curiosity and keeps them from developing inconvenient or awkward questions.

For this reason, I want to take a moment and talk about the concept of "bad tension". Bad tension is when readers' questions aren't coming from solely curiosity, but confusion, for example from conflicting messages in the book or implications the author didn't intend and the reader isn't sure how to feel about. At its worst, this kind of discomfort can make readers stop reading.

For example, I got “bad tension” in this version of your book from the fact that while Ellen was mentioned in the context of supporting you through your treatment, she was given no interiority, and you two seemed to have little fun or spark together. Meanwhile, you mentioned attraction and flirting with women at the hospital. My problem wasn’t necessarily moral, but I was confused about how the book wanted me to feel. If the book had provided focused, long-term questions in the exposition about Ellen and your marriage, that could have channeled my curiosity into a direction that helped build my interest in the larger narrative about you rather than distracting from it.

The exact nature of the questions would depend on your target audience and chosen narrative emphasis. Target audience of women over 30? Questions might include, “Has the marriage to this point been fair and satisfying to Ellen, so that she feels good about helping Tom, or are there reasons for resentment or even concern about his loyalty?” “What are pain points for Ellen in these cancer years and in the marriage generally?” “Will Tom be able to be emotionally available for Ellen as treatment goes on?”

Target audience of men over 60, especially men from traditional backgrounds? “Is Ellen still attractive to Tom? Will she stay attractive when she’s busy and stressed as she tries to help him through treatment?” “Does Ellen really care about Tom, or is she only helping begrudgingly?” “Does Ellen know that Tom finds other women attractive, and if yes, will it make things more difficult for Tom?” (Just for instance).

Once you’re more sure of your target audience, I recommend going through the book and looking for sources of bad tension. Planting questions in the long-, medium-, and short-term can help channel reader curiosity so they don’t get distracted by things you didn’t mean for them to think about.

Recommendations

This manuscript has strengths in its documentary-style details, descriptions of physiological states, and physicality, spatiality, movement, and sensory detail. Promisingly, there are already instances of tension and release, although I’m not yet getting the sense that escalating tension and release has been a key composition strategy to date. Potential avenues for commercial-friendly development might include:

1. Brainstorming and committing to a narrower target audience, then using that TA as a yardstick to assess further editing decisions

2. Raising narrative emphasis: deciding on a primary topic or small, interrelated group of topics and events to amplify in the manuscript while playing down other topics and events from the current draft
3. Building a more robust and specific premise to use as a yardstick to assess further editing decisions
4. Putting off the title search until a more specific narrative emphasis is settled on, then drawing the topic from that narrower and more concrete group of images and ideas
5. Using “B matter” to enhance narrative emphasis and word count
6. Giving the book a climax
7. Planting reader questions for the long-, medium-, and short-term of the book
8. Using the idea of the target audience to comb the book for sources of bad tension, then channeling reader curiosity about those topics in the ways you want using long- and medium-term questions

Thank you again for allowing me to read this draft of *[redacted]* and offer my comments. I hope to see more from you in the future.

Exercises

- 1) Go through your draft and word-count every discrete episode/topic (for example, how many words are used to describe drugs and altered states? What percentage of the total word count does that make up?)
- 2) When you’ve made a full list, step back and ask yourself:
 - a) Which events and topics already have more priority in the word count
 - b) Are these things really what I want my book to be about?
 - c) Do I want to continue to accentuate them, or prune them back?
- 3) If none of the events or topics seems to dominate the word count, that could be an indicator that the narrative focus is too vague to achieve the goals you described at the time of submission. A next step would be to choose a main focus for the book. Mind mapping, brainstorming, and freewriting/journaling are your friends here.