

Critique: *That Boy There* [Working title subsequently changed to *Boys and Men* after receipt of critique]

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Critiquer: Annie Mydla

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Critique summary

Dear Kevin,

Thank you so much for trusting me with *That Boy There*. This is a slow, steady, powerful YA novel, with a strong moral message and a bittersweet coming-of-age story. In my critique, I'll touch on several aspects I especially admired, including the plotting (yes, you can rest easy in regards to the structural decisions you asked about); the writing style; the visual unity; the social critique; and the ending. I'll also touch on the idea of marketing the MS in the USA and why that might not be as much of a stretch as you fear.

Beyond these ideas, I'll speak to growth areas in the MS: Some slight changes to the language regarding trees that may be unfamiliar to American readers; the title; how to format your manuscript to professional standards; the possible pacing advantages of breaking up long paragraphs into shorter ones; and the suggestion that now may be a good time to clean up any remaining typos in preparation for submissions to agents and publishers. I'll finish with a summary of recommendations and a few exercises to spark imagination in future drafts.

The overall message I'd like to get across is that I think you are right to be looking ahead to marketing. The MS mostly feels finished and ready for the query stage. The suggestions I'll be making here have more to do with finishing touches and orienting the MS for being shopped around as opposed to any large structural or thematic changes. I hope that my ideas will be consistent with your own thinking and help you in the positive direction you're already headed.

Content and structure

Strength: Plotting

I was highly impressed with the structure and organization of the plot. In your questions, you expressed concern over a few of your structural choices, namely the backstory at the beginning and the decision to suspend the revelation of what happened to Pop until the trial scenes. I'd like to respond to both of these questions here affirmatively: Nonlinear storytelling can be an important source of suspense and immersivity when done correctly, and in *That Boy There* it felt like a success both in the beginning of the book and in the trial sequence. Well done.

In regards to the beginning of the book, I considered that one of the reasons the backstory doesn't drag is that it's about so much more than the plot context. There's a fascinating focus on boys and men, the layout of the town, and the plant imagery, all of which continue to be essential to the story as it progresses up to and including the final scene. The marriage of the plot-important information and the visual and thematic information in the opening chapters establishes what I think of as "juxtapositional density", the immersive quality of literature created when images and ideas set in close proximity feed back on one another. After a certain threshold of

“juxtapositional density” is reached, the book starts to feel truly immersive. Your book has passed this threshold. This isn't at all easy to do and to me is a mark of authorly maturity.

Beyond the beginning and the trial scenes, I also admired the circular structures within the book. Rarely if ever did we receive an answer to a question immediately; we had to wait a satisfying (but not tedious) amount of time before learning more about any particular issue. For example, I enjoyed how we had to wait for background about Carol's death, receiving small pieces of information until the fuller confrontation on pages 134-135. The decision to build up that picture slowly resulted in more suspense and immersivity than if the information had been released all at once.

Another satisfying instance of circularity within the narrative was the use of Mr Crack. Mentioned at the beginning and implied to be something of an outsider, his reappearance in the final scene made me feel a bit emotional in a good way. Here's someone who has borne the brunt of the town's suspicion all his life, and yet this "strange man" helps Ben in a way no one else can by abetting his escape (an escape Mr Crack himself will never know). To me, this symbolized how younger generations make their way towards social progress and freedom on the backs of allies in older generations who may never enjoy the freedoms themselves. The theme reminded me of the saying that “a wise man plants a tree whose shade he will never enjoy”, which I realize is also thematically appropriate to the tree content in your MS.

Language-wise, I also appreciated the way you subtly kept Mr Crack on the reader's radar by using the word "crack" and variations on it throughout the narrative, even when other words would have done just as well. Did you realize you were doing that? Some authors do, some don't, and the result is an equally good sign in both cases. Hit ctrl+f and search for “crack” in your manuscript and you'll see what I mean. The word choice enhances the feeling of circularity when the man himself finally makes his reappearance. Nicely done.

Strength: Writing style

This may seem like a relatively untechnical remark for a book critiquer to make, but when your job is to read large quantities of manuscripts, you really come to appreciate it when one is simply well-written. The straightforward style and the steady, somewhat slow pacing is well equipped for the emotional and social heavy-lifting required by the content. Tone-wise, I like the gentleness, wistfulness, and sense of unfairness, and underlying sense of horror indirectly expressed in what we read between the lines rather than what Ben himself sees or thinks.

Another bonus of the style was the use of central concepts and images on multiple narrative layers. Like the consistent use of the word "crack" (which by the way also implies posteriors with the manuscript's characteristically gentle, or perhaps gently grim, sense of humor – as well

as the “crack” of a tree branch or bush when someone pushes past), other strategies were used to indirectly keep the reader's attention focused on the most important motifs and ideas within the story. For example, on page 2, we see the following sentence (bold emphasis mine):

Then, before he discovered my **violation** of the family **butter**, the man turned sideways and allowed me enough room to slide past his **belt buckle**.

Violation, (butt)er, the man barely turning, Ben sliding past the belt buckle: It all visually, linguistically, and emotionally reinforces the passage's, and book's, turning-over of the themes of male sexualities; homosociality versus homosexuality; affection and enjoyment versus abuse. The alliteration of "butter" and "belt buckle" also harks back to the "bushes" that play such an important role throughout the story.

A third stylistic trait I admired was the narration's ability to do multiple complex things within a single paragraph. For example, on page 173, I liked this passage:

Nothing moved. The scene a photograph, sharp and hyper-coloured. I stared at Dad; Dad stared at the gun. Even Blue stood motionless. I could smell beer on Dad and watched the barrel shake in his hands. For a moment it terrified me he may have a reason to raise the gun and point it at me, but he kept it low and fixed me instead with wide, crazed eyes, inclining his head as if not recognising my face. I started to say *I'm Ben, your son – put the rifle back*, when he stepped towards me, bent at the waist and brought his face level with mine.

Here we encounter excellent visuals, excellent psychology, action, suspense, and characterization, all combined in a single moment. And the moment itself is extended past its natural duration, in turn enhancing the suspense without ever breaking immersivity. This passage and many others felt truly literary to me. Great job.

Strength: Excellent visual unity

Trees, boys, and men: What a wonderful group of images to build a story on. From the first page, the manuscript never lost focus on these fundamental images and the meanings associated with them. By the end of the book, the meanings had expanded and deepened, and I felt like the manuscript had performed the important digestive work of discovering and turning over as many related images and concepts as it could. By the time we get to the "new deeper voice" on page 279, and the dew, the old leaves in damp soil, and the dawns of the past million years on page 280, we are as ready as Ben for the transformation that's already working within him and, by extension of the manuscript's visual and thematic work, within us.

Strength: Examination of bigoted thinking and double standards regarding homosexuality, heterosexuality, and homosociality

Thematic unity and probing was another excellent feature of the manuscript, and one executed with rare sympathy, subtlety, and skill. This narrative recognizes how bigotry and abuse both twist genuine values like love and the desire to protect our loved ones in order to justify hateful, anti-social behaviors, and how slippery bigots and abusers can be when they are skilled at rhetoric that makes use of these commonly held values.

For example, I was impressed at the way the manuscript represents the crossover, in the public perception, of being gay and being an abuser. To many members of the audience at the trial, “homosexual” and “abuser” are the same thing. The manuscript is able to indirectly communicate the absurdity and brutality, and also the folly, of a community that would seek to use Dad's trial for killing Pop as an excuse to posthumously try and condemn Pop for homosexual activity. As Raylene says on pages 224-225, there's a townwide desire to believe that Dad was "doing everyone a favour" because he "had a reason to shoot" Pop, that reason being that Pop engaged in homosexual behavior. In a world where homosexual activity is equivalent to abuse regardless of consent, could murder conceivably be justified when the victim participated in homosexuality? It's a chilling thought, and the book's demonstration of the mentality working within society (for example around pages 200-203) is highly effective.

Related to this is the manuscript's demonstration of the double standard in society about exposing children to sexual ideas. Heterosexual ideas are fine to expose children to at an early age, but homosexual ideas are not. Suspicion about "strange men" in the bushes is expressed by various characters from the earliest pages of the book, and on page 113, Ben is told to be suspicious of Mauro and any man "putting ideas into your head before you're old enough to have them". In contrast, it's assumed to be perfectly fine on page 224 when Raylene suggests setting Ben up with her "sexy" female friends, even though he is still very young. By that point in the manuscript, Ben is fully aware of the double standard, and we fully share his impatience and fatigue.

Personally, I was also fascinated by the book's examination of homosexuality and homosociality. Depending on the circumstances, characters would try to prove that instances of homosociality were in fact episodes of homosexuality, or the other way around. For example, in this scene on page 213:

My father's lawyer rose and asked in a voice louder than necessary: 'Mr Fantelli. Did you ever see Mr Bayley without clothes?'

Mauro's replied without hesitation: 'Yes, of course.'

The lawyer appeared a little stunned to get the information so easily. ‘Can you tell me when, and were the circumstances sexual?’

‘Not sexual, no! There is showers at the mill for when workers have become too dirty in the sawdust. They need to clean up and they shower. I have seen every other man there undressed also. It is not unusual.’

‘Did Mr Bayley shower with you at the same time? Were you ever naked together?’

‘Yes, I believe so.’

‘Did you ever see Mr Bayley acting inappropriately with anyone in the showers?’
Mauro looked a little bewildered and shook his head. ‘No!’

Here, the lawyer attempts to frame Pop's nakedness as homosexual in character. In the lawyer's own social context, communal nakedness is probably much less common and more associated with sexuality, and he assumes or hopes that the jury will feel the same so that Pop's behavior will seem abnormal and threatening. In contrast, Mauro's context is the working-class culture of the mill, where it's necessary and normal for men to shower together. This kind of culture clash (who has the right to define what is sexual behavior and what is not? The upper classes? The lower classes? The people actually engaged in the behavior, or their "superiors" who are distanced from the behavior?) gives the narrative a timeless literary feeling like that found in social novels like *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Jungle*.

I also appreciated that it was Mauro chosen as the witness in this scene, given Mauro's involvement in the scene with the letters, another example of homosociality versus homosexuality in the text. Were Mauro's letters an example of an older man supporting a boy in his maturation process as a mentor? Or an inappropriate grooming behavior? And who has the right to characterize that behavior - Ben, Ma, Mauro himself? All of them? None of them? And what role does the reader's judgment/feelings play in all this – *or the author's*? Fascinating and unanswerable questions such as these are the real stuff of literature, and one of the most admirable qualities of all about this manuscript was its elegant posing of these questions while refraining from answering them.

Strength: Ending

As I started to mention above, I was highly impressed and touched by the ending. The circularity with Mr Crack was a big part of that. According to the logic of all the suspicious and gossip-minded people in the town, a young boy like Ben getting into a car with a strange older man like Mr Crack should result in abusive sexual activity. Instead, as we witness, the scene is infused with the subtle companionship of two outsiders who know that their alliance is destined to be brief. To me, the implication by that point in the story, and for some time preceding, is that Ben

is likely not straight. The scene with Mr Crack shows an unspoken bond and support that goes beyond "sex" straight to the heart of identity, alienation, and human sympathy.

And yet, characteristic of the gentle humor of the manuscript, something phallic does get squeezed: The pinecone. Just as an individual's sexuality has a significance that is far more personal, deep, and ineffable than could ever be comprehended by a bigot, so too does the pinecone, representing Ben's highly individual experience and conflicting emotions regarding the town, its people, what happened to him there, and what he fears could happen if he stayed. Ben's squeeze communicates his complex relationship with his past, himself, his possible queerness, the man he is to become, and the bleak future that his escape from the town will hopefully prevent.

Author question: I'd like your opinion on whether the book would find a ready market in the United States. It's set on the other side of the world and some of the vernacular may not be understood. As the largest book market is in the US, if your critique is favourable, It could be rewritten to reset the location and the language (but probably not by me!). I just wonder if this is something that should be suggested in any approach I make to a publisher.

Oh yes, I would say that in the United States, [LGBTQ+, YA, coming-of-age literature is welcome from all quarters](#), especially from what American readers might perceive as "the farthest corners of the globe". After reading this manuscript, I certainly don't detect any need to "translate" the story into US culture. I might even recommend maximizing the Aussiness from the very beginning, for example, with a more Aussie-centric title.

Even aside from the general desirability of multicultural, multiclass expressions of LGBTQ+ voices in YA, another benefit of "foreignness" in the context of this manuscript is the fact that it examines bigotry. As long as America has existed, Americans have enjoyed examining the concept of bigotry *from the perspective of outsiders*. We need to process our own substantial bigotry, but sometimes it can be less painful to do so through the lens of fiction about non-Americans. I believe that American readers will enjoy the experience of identifying the bigotry at play in this book and comparing it to what they've witnessed in their own lives without feeling that it's *too* close to home. That could be another reason to play up the Aussiness instead of playing it down.

I would encourage you to approach US-based agents and publishers with the Australian foundations of the book as its greatest selling point and see what happens. My guess is that the reception might be more favorable than what you've been anticipating. If not, you can always modify your approach later.

Language

To consider: Language around trees could be clearer in the beginning

Related to your question about the reception by American readers, there was one aspect of the book's language that I considered might possibly benefit from more clarity: Trees. In the beginning of the book, there were a few trees that I as an American had never heard of, and it took me a moment to realize that they *were* trees. This broke the immersivity of the text unnecessarily. For example, on page 3, "peppermints" might be instead called "peppermint trees" to allow readers to picture them in their minds as trees (as opposed to candies). Similarly, on page 6, the "Geraldton wax" might be more immediately understandable if called a "Geraldton wax tree". This is undoubtedly an issue on the small side, but since you asked about possible Aus/US comprehension issues, I wanted to mention it.

To consider: Title could be more evocative of the content

If your intent is to market the book in the USA, it could be strategic to use a title that is more indicative of the Australian content. I might also recommend considering one that invokes the wistful, somewhat lonely coming-of-age journey of Ben. The current choice of *That Boy There* is perfectly serviceable, but felt possibly a bit too abrupt or outward-pointing. Even a minor change, like shifting the wording to reflect the interiority of the narration (*This Boy, This Boy Here, The Boy I Am*) might increase effectiveness. It could be an interesting idea to look at the titles of other Australian LGBTQ+ YA coming-of-age novels, such as are found on Goodreads list linked to above or the [auslgbtqua Tumblr blog](#), and brainstorm possibilities in a similar vein.

Layout and technical elements

To consider: Format to professional submission standards

Agents, publishers, and other literary professionals appreciate it when authors take the time to apply industry standards of formatting to their manuscripts before sending them to be critiqued, reviewed, or considered for representation/publication. While the current manuscript uses an appropriate font with double spacing, there were some important formatting elements that could still be implemented, for example, giving each new chapter its own page to start on. It might be worthwhile to take a look at a guide to formatting a professional-looking manuscript just to make sure your manuscript will look like what agents and publishers are expecting to see. A good guide can be found here: [How to Format a Book, with Examples \(2022\)](#).

To consider: Long paragraphs may be interfering with the otherwise-steady pacing

Periodically throughout the book I discovered isolated paragraphs that were oddly long compared to the established average length in other parts of the manuscript. These long paragraphs caused the narrative to drag when they appeared. Each one I looked at seemed like it would be fairly easy to split into multiple smaller paragraphs, and that the splitting alone would bring the pace back to what it should be.

Examples of long paragraphs can be found in the current manuscript on pages 4, 142, 173-174, and 179-180, as well as in other places. In future drafts, I'd recommend splitting longer paragraphs into shorter ones, taking care with action scenes especially. In action scenes, the eye needs space to rest while the mind digests all the various movements and interactions.

Another thing to keep an eye out for in future drafts is how dialog interacts with paragraphing. According to today's formatting standards, if multiple characters are speaking, or if one character is speaking with action by another character in between, they should be given their own lines/paragraphs in which to do so. For example, on page 139, we see the following paragraph:

I didn't need to say more, and, looking back, I wondered how I'd managed to say that, and how they even made sense of my words between sobs and shallow gasps for air. To escape, I buried my face into a cushion but the ugly dark sore on Pop's chest stayed with me. Mr Donald left the room and reappeared, dressed. He spoke to his wife in a low voice and then to me. 'I'll see what's going on. Does anyone know you're here, Ben?' I shook my head. 'Your grandmother must be sick with worry. At least I can tell her you're safe.'

For visual clarity and pacing, I might advise breaking the paragraph up as follows:

I didn't need to say more, and, looking back, I wondered how I'd managed to say that, and how they even made sense of my words between sobs and shallow gasps for air. To escape, I buried my face into a cushion but the ugly dark sore on Pop's chest stayed with me.

Mr Donald left the room and reappeared, dressed. He spoke to his wife in a low voice and then to me. 'I'll see what's going on. Does anyone know you're here, Ben?'

I shook my head.

'Your grandmother must be sick with worry. At least I can tell her you're safe.'

To me, the second version reads easier on a visual level. The action is separated and the two lines of dialog are more intentionally punctuated by Ben's head shake. Generally, I would guess that future drafts might benefit from more generous paragraphing all over, but this is of course a stylistic judgment call. Stylistic unity is the main consideration.

To consider: Manuscript still contains many typos

I sense that this draft is close to the query stage, and so I would suggest that now could be a good time to get serious about scouring for typos and other anomalies. There are currently enough to put off agents on that basis alone, and that would be a shame.

For example, on page 3, a period is missing at the end of the sentence:

Of course, that's why the cabins attracted us. In our narrow world, depravities were in short supply

On page 139, a word is missing at the start of the paragraph:

made me more comfortable by moving onto the couch and pulling my head to her lap. Mr Donald left and his van reversed and roared away.

If feasible, I might recommend working with a professional proofreader to scrub the manuscript before sending it to other literary professionals.

Recommendations

The current draft contains many strengths, including plotting, writing style, excellent visual unity and examination of themes relating to homosexuality, homosociality, and heterosexuality, and the ending. I believe that the book would be marketable in the United States in the LGBTQ+ YA coming-of-age genre without any need to "translate" the story into the US cultural context. In fact, I would go so far as to recommended emphasizing the Aussiness of the story, starting with the title. In future drafts, it might be helpful to tweak the language around tree varieties to make it immediately clear to foreign readers that the narrative is referring to trees. It might also be advantageous to edit for longer-than-normal paragraphs, as well as paragraphs where too much action and/or dialog piled up in one unit might be interfering with the pace and reader's eye movement. Finally, as the MS is evidently nearly ready for the query stage, it could be the right time to start paying closer attention to submissions concerns like professional formatting and scrubbing the document of any remaining typos or other technical errors.

Exercises

1. Create a copy of the current manuscript in a new draft. Scroll through and use the yellow highlight tool to pick out all paragraphs that:
 - a. Are significantly longer than the others
 - b. Contain multiple lines of dialog, either from more than one character or one character whose speech is interspersed with action
 - c. Contain action with multiple stages

Do you see any patterns in the highlighted passages that might indicate certain writerly proclivities of yours? Do you tend to create these long paragraphs in certain contexts?

After considering what might have led to the creation of the long paragraphs, go through the MS again and break them up, following natural points of separation like:

- a. Transitions between ideas
 - b. Transitions between characters
 - c. Steps in an action scene
 - d. Lines of dialog
2. Read the lists of titles in the webpages linked to above. Write down at least 10 "rules" or conventions that seem to guide title selection in these books (it's okay if the "rules" you identify apply only to a few on the list, or feel too general – the goal is just to conduct a basic examination, so the list doesn't have to be exhaustively accurate in order to be helpful).

Next, set a timer for 5 minutes and write down as many central images, themes, and phrases from the book as you possibly can. Do not stop to reread what has been written - the point is to generate as much material as possible. Set the list aside for 24 hours, then look again. Do any of these images, themes, and phrases point the way forward on a new title? Do any fit in with the other titles or "rules"/conventions you identified in the first part of this exercise?