

Critique: *The Three Little Sprigs*  
Author: Terry Marsh  
Critiquer: Annie Mydla  
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## **Critique summary**

Dear Terry,

Thank you so much for allowing me to critique this draft of *The Three Little Sprigs*. I think you've really got something special here. While reading, I felt a connection with each of the three sprigs, their parents, and the whole premise - even Lonely Wind and Stinging Rain. I hope my

comments will add constructively to your existing meditations on how to move forward with this draft.

In this critique, I'll discuss three main areas: Content and structure, Language, and Layout and technical elements. The first section will cover what I considered to be major strengths of the story as written: The premise, the engaging illustrations, and your use of foreshadowing. From there, I'll move on to a few potential growth areas, like how to reinforce the underlying logic of the story and how to maximize the narrative potential of the opening and closing scenes. I'll also describe how the neighborhood visit scene might possibly be trimmed in order to improve overall pacing.

The second and third sections will cover matters of language and layout. Here, I'll compliment the text's middle register, professional appearance, and variety of page layouts, all of which I thought suited the content and age group very well. I'll also point out a few places where punctuation and layout might be improved as your editing process continues. Finally, the critique will close with a summary of recommendations and a few writing exercises to inspire the imagination for future drafts.

## **Content and structure**

### *Strength: Premise*

Many authors have retold "The Three Little Pigs", but I have rarely come across such a charming, colorful adaptation. The sprigs' family is immediately likable and relatable. I was also drawn in by the idea of each of the sprigs having to choose a helper to build their home. This addition augments the existing fable by giving children the opportunity to examine what their personal values and desires might be, and to imagine their own future homes.

### *Strength: Playful, engaging illustrations*

The illustrations by Lintang Pandu Pratiwi complement the text well. Even the "bad guys" like Lonely Wind and Stinging Rain are likable, being cute enough to entertain rather than frighten children. (Some children may even relate to the desire to knock things down - I know I do!) I especially enjoyed the whole-page images found on pages , 2, 11, 19, and 25. Please pass my compliments along to the illustrator.

### *Strength: Foreshadowing*

Many emerging children's book authors neglect to take into account how sophisticated children's minds are even at young ages. They therefore do not take advantage of narrative structural features like foreshadowing. In contrast, your story respects the intelligence of young children's minds and makes use of foreshadowing, for example in the discussion of what happened with Easy-Peasy, as well as on page 14: "Not just anyone should come through these doors". Young readers will absolutely pick up on and enjoy these hints of what's to come.

*To consider: Reinforcing the story's underlying logic*

One suggestion I do have is to make sure that what the book is saying in the text is always consistent with what it demonstrates in the plot. For example, one possible inconsistency I noticed is that although we are presented with the idea that "Night Wind always knows who to send", it's also clear that Night Wind sent the wrong person in the case of Easy-Peasy. This contradicts the idea that Night Wind always knows who to send. Children may pick up on this and ask their readers why, and it might not be an easy question to answer.

A way to get around this issue in future drafts might be to show a brief back-and-forth between each sprig and Night Wind during the selection process. For example, on page 10, when Sassy requests Fun, Night Wind might ask her again if that's what she *really* wants, and even make a suggestion about an alternative that could build a stronger house. But when Sassy insists, Night Wind would go with her choice of Fun. The same could happen with Starling.

These exchanges would not necessarily have to take up too much room. They could even be condensed into one conversation, possibly something like this:

Night Wind was upon them. Sassy and Starling, with their eyes half-closed, whispered to Night Wind the names of the Helpers they wanted her to send.

"Fun," giggled Sassy.

"Fame," breathed Starling.

"Are you sure?" questioned Night Wind. "I could name some others. Friendship, Hope..."

"Fun and Fame!" exclaimed the sisters. Night Wind gently smiled and nodded her head in acceptance.

Serena lay perfectly still, waiting for the name of a Helper to pop into her head. Nothing came. She hugged her blanket tighter and stared at the ceiling.

"I just don't know," she sighed.

This is of course not a hard-and-fast recommendation, I'm only mentioning it to show that the underlying logic of the story could be increased without too much extra text. After reading your book, I certainly trust you as an author to find your own excellent solutions.

One more small quibble I had was that at the end of the book, it wasn't totally clear to me why Kindness was the trait that made the strong house. Of course we all know that kindness is good, and we want to encourage children to be kind, but for me it doesn't follow that kindness = strong physical building. Might there be another trait that has more of an implication of "physical strength", like, just for example, Teamwork? But you could likely think of better ones.

Another approach might be to have some brief discussion at the beginning of the book about how Kindness is a source of strength. I could imagine this happening in just a sentence or two in the family discussion that happens from page 5-7. Or what if, on page 9, Sassy and Starling laugh scornfully after hearing the story about Easy-Peasy, and then their mother gently reprimands them, saying something like, "Now girls, remember to be Kind. Kindness creates strength and harmony in our world." Again, though, these are just ideas.

*To consider: Opening scene*

Composition-wise, I had a few thoughts. I enjoyed both Serena's mirror scene and the family discussion scene, but was wondering if they both might be more effective if their order was switched. The family discussion might possibly be a better hook because it would let readers know what's going on right away. Meanwhile, the mirror scene might be more effective coming second (or perhaps even a little later - for example, right before Night Wind's visit on page 10) because readers will already have the background and character connections they need in order to feel a buildup of suspense while Serena is looking at herself.

*To consider: Editing for pacing*

It also occurred to me that there might possibly be a few places where the text could be trimmed in order to keep up the pacing. One example that stuck out to me was the family visit throughout the Woodland Kingdom. The visit scene is nice, but may be a bit "extra" in terms of the scope of the book, which I sensed focused mainly on the houses of the central characters. When the narrative starts to take the characters outside their houses and the construction of the houses, it could feel a bit drifty.

That doesn't mean there's nothing important about the visit scene. I considered that important elements of the visit scene might be effectively moved elsewhere, though. For example, if you want to include the story of Easy-Peasy, which I think is a good idea, it could be put into the main family conversation at the beginning. One way to do it could be to have Mother Fern bring it up on page 5 after she says, "But not every Helper is cut out for building houses":

“But not every Helper is cut out for building houses. Remember Red Chokeberry? She said she was tired of always being thought of as tough, so she asked for Easy-Peasy to be her Helper. The house didn't even last a season.”

Mother Fern smiled at her girls. "You each want to think hard about what is most important to you.”

In this rewrite, we have all the benefits of the Easy-Peasy foreshadowing, without the possible narrative deviation of the visit through the community. Just something to think about as you consider your own way forward.

*To consider: Dialing up narrative circularity*

In children's books, a sense of circularity between the beginning and ending can often create a satisfying final scene. In the case of *The Three Little Sprigs* I wondered if it might be a good idea to create circularity by incorporating the parents into the end somehow, since they were such an important presence in the beginning.

For example, Mother and Father Fern might burst in to Serena's house to check on the sprigs after having heard of the two sisters' houses getting blown down. Then Serena could deliver the final line about Kindness to all of them at once. The circularity of having the parents there both at the beginning and ending could provide an extra little nudge of satisfaction for readers.

Moreover, having the parents present at the end might also have an emotional benefit for children who may be worried about growing up. If Mother and Father Fern visited the girls at Serena's house, it could reassure children that although they'll someday strike out on their own, they will still be able to have their parents in their lives as supportive and involved figures. I know this would likely involve more work for the illustrator, but it might be worth considering for potential structural and emotional bonuses to the story.

## **Language**

*Strength: Accessible register, augmented by glossary*

I was impressed by the appropriateness of the language for the content and audience. The book maintains a middle register which keeps the text accessible and immersive for children. Another benefit is that the text is well-proofread, which is important for kids who are learning to read and write. I also enjoyed the glossary in the back to explain the words and phrases that will likely be new to that age group. Great job.

*To consider: Watch out for punctuation!*

While the majority of the book was well-proofread, I noticed that the final sentence on page 24 was missing a quotation mark. This is the last page of the story, so it's important to fix this in future drafts!

“Oh, Serena.” Sassy sniffed. “What will I do? My house is gone!”  
“Mine too,” whispered Starling. “What will we do?”  
“What will you do?” Serena asked, putting a leafy arm around each sister.  
“You’ll stay here with me, of course, in the house that Kindness built.”

### **Layout and technical elements**

*Strength: Professional appearance*

I was impressed by the production of this book. The front and back covers, illustrations, back blurb, front matter, back matter, and dedication all appear professional and enhance reader immersion.

*Strength: Variety of page layouts is fun and engaging*

The variety of page layouts creates a dynamic feeling throughout the book. Two-page spreads like 24-25 are complemented with a variety of other layouts, ensuring that the eye is always moving and that children will have images to look at even on text-heavy pages.

*To consider: Leaving more space around the text to increase visual comfort*

On several pages I did notice that the text and images were just a bit too close together, creating a cramped feeling. For example, on page 6, there is hardly any space between text and image:

“How will we know when Night Wind comes?” asked Serena.

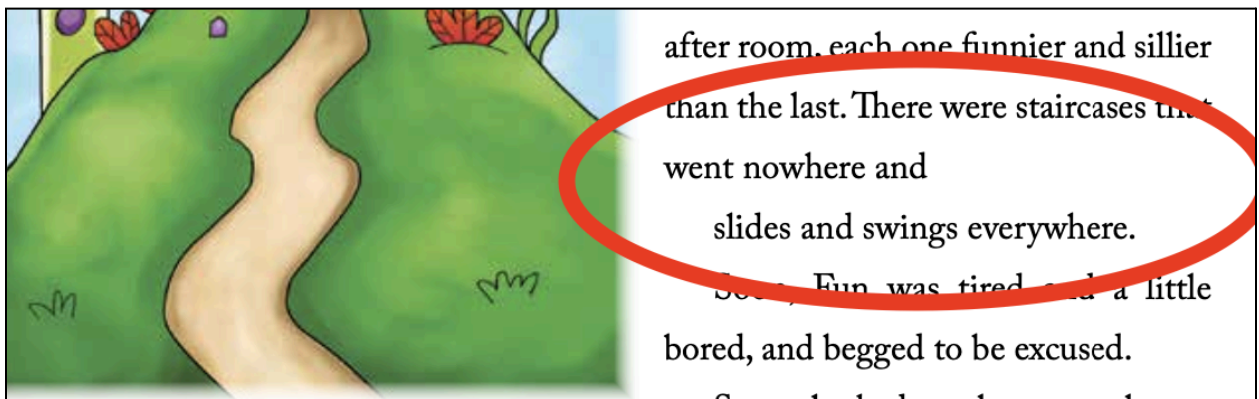
“Don’t worry, you will know. But!” Father Fern stood tall on his roots. “You must not tell anyone what you say to Night Wind, or no help will be given. It must stay a secret till the Helper comes to build with you.”



Unfortunately, the close proximity of text and image makes it hard for the reader's eye to process what's on the page, creating an uncomfortable feeling that decreases immersivity. In future drafts, it could be better to give both text and images plenty of space. Other pages where this issue appeared were 12, 14, 16, 17, 18, and 21.

*To consider: Occasional errors in text formatting*

A final issue I noticed was the presence of inappropriate breaks in the text on two occasions, for example, on page 13:



And on page 15:

crowd outside Starling's fancy new house had grown.

Starling looked up the hill, where she'd seen Sassy heading earlier that morning, and then looked down the hill at the stream, where she knew Serena would go.

Looking at her big, beautiful new home with pride, Starling whispered to herself, "No house could ever compare to the house that Fame built!"



This may seem like a small issue, but it makes a difference, especially to agents and publishers who may come across your work. Your book is good, and it would be a shame if it lost readers or industry attention due to technical errors like this.

## Recommendations

The main assets of the current manuscript are its premise, engaging illustrations, the use of foreshadowing, the accessible language, and a highly professional appearance. However, as discussed, a bit more attention to the underlying logic and pacing of the story, as well as to the opening and closing scenes, might boost the book's immersivity and attractiveness even further. Going forward, it could also possibly be beneficial to be aware of visual cramping occurring when text and images are too close together, as well as any blips in the text formatting. Finally, though the text is well-proofread already, a final pass to eliminate any lingering errors could make the whole production shine to its highest luster.

## Exercises

1. If North Wind always knows the right Helper to send, how could someone end up with a less-than-optimal Helper like Easy-Peasy, Fun, or Fame? Take 10 minutes and write out as many answers to this question as you can. Don't stop to read the list as you go - the goal is to generate as many ideas as possible. Put the list aside for 24 hours, then look again. Does one of the ideas there suggest a way dorward?
2. Repeat Exercise 1, but this time with the question: "Why does Kindness lead to a strong house, and how can I plant the seeds of this idea earlier in the narrative"?



3. Brainstorm how to insert Mother and Father Fern into the final scene of the story. Do they come visit? Call on the phone? Might they reassure Sassy and Starling that they will have a chance to build new houses?