

Critique: *White Chrysanthemums*

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Critiquer: Annie Mydla

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## **Critique summary**

Dear Jan,

Thank you so much for trusting me with the critique of this draft of *White Chrysanthemums*. I'm glad for the chance to express my admiration for its many strengths in content, structure, genre

expression, and consideration for its target readership. I also might have identified some ways to edit towards even more salability, for example, developing how pacing is used to create page-turning energy, taking care to give each scene its own internal arc, slimming the word count to reinforce genre identity, and reconsidering Papa's shooting and how the portrayal of Jubie might come across to the target audience. 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.

A developmental critique is a bird's-eye look at a draft, examining the broadest possible dynamics in structure and content in relation to the author's long-term goals for the book. Developmental critiques often recommend fundamental changes that would demand extensive rewrites. Don't worry if you're not inclined to execute sweeping changes. This critique's true aim is to get the author thinking about developmental tools that could come in handy, maybe in this project, maybe in future ones.

A little bit about me: I'm the managing editor of *Winning Writers*, and I've been with the organization for about 10 years. In that time, I've critiqued over 500 full-length books and manuscripts and delivered judging feedback on over 2,000 North Street Book Prize entries.

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

### **Topic: Page-turning (PT)**

*Strength: The content and structure of this book really had me turning pages!*

This is such a special book. I'm pretty sure I'm squarely within your target audience, which means the book had a lot of content that kept the pages turning for me. I especially enjoyed:

- The timeliness of the subject matter to 2026, when progressive values and civil liberties are under threat
- The physical details of the period
- The social details and social critique (like page 65, where Sachi ponders on whether she is white or "colored", showing the absurdity of these constructs)
- The drama of feeling progressive movements under threat, like with the bomb in the church on pages 200-201
- The emotional tension and release of the characters' relationships and their struggles with the concepts of saving face vs lying
- The joy of the march towards the end

- Relief that the family can reconcile with Terrence
- Relief that Mama is finally able to tell the truth
- Relief that Nobu finds peace

Other readers in your target audience will cherish the same and more!

For non-experimental novels in literary or genre fiction, much of what readers and agents alike are looking for boils down to creating that "page-turning feeling", which for brevity's sake I'll refer to as PT. PT is anything that keeps the reader feeling "pulled forward". It typically comes from two main factors: one, making the reader curious about questions they get from the text, and two, whetting the reader's appetite with things they want more of, like beauty, sense of humor, or scares. I recently wrote a rough list for my assistants of common sources of PT, and I'm attaching that list to my critique delivery message for your reference.

Writers and editors can sometimes also experience "craft pleasure PT" while reading (described on the PT sheet attached to the email). I definitely did experience that in your draft, from things like the well-calibrated scope of the narrative, the good structure, motifs like the flowers, the ways the characters' plotlines intersected to create plot tension and emotional tension, and, most powerfully of all, from the choice of premise. Contest judges see a lot of the same old premises, including about the 1950s. Your premise was fresh in how it gave me an experience of the 1950s that centered the experience of people of color and multi-cultural characters instead of white culture. That fundamental decision did more for me than anything else to keep the pages turning. Fantastic work.

I was also impressed by the book's overarching structure, which felt professional in how it first generated curiosity for me, raised the stakes on my questions, and then resolved them. The exposition started me off on the right track with questions about Nobu's relationship with his family, especially Papa. Then the inciting incident, finding Mama's letter, complicated those questions and provided the basis for Nobu's radicalization plotline. The way Terrence was introduced made me curious about how he had changed between his crime and today, and how Sachi and the family would relate to him. Later, I became hopeful that Jubie would find love with Terrence and that he would find peace in life. Importantly, the rising action didn't leave me alone with these questions—it fulfilled my expectations by continuing to answer them and others over the course of the book. That kept the page-turning energy flowing.

The book had a clear climax that related back to the exposition—Nobu coming to the breaking point with his complicated feelings about his family, Terrence, and the idea of lies. The falling action and resolution tied up loose ends and gave me a sense of closure... but added a little extra bit of page-turning energy at the end with the suggestion that Taro will find the box in the future. I felt closure, but also wanted more. That's hard to achieve!

No matter what edits you make going forward, what you have here already makes me confident that you'll be able to maintain good narrative momentum in your structure. That's a wonderful gift!

*Author question: The book is written from the point of view of four characters: Nobu, Sachi, Taro, and Jubie. Do any of the characters lack in development to keep the readers' interests? Does telling the story this way feel disjointed?*

I don't think it feels disjointed. For me, ensemble casts work when all the characters share a common quest or challenge. In this book, the characters share the challenge of living in a racist society, and coping with that racism is a big part of the plot for all of them. So getting different perspectives on individual experiences of racism felt more like deepening to me rather than disjointedness.

*Author question: The epilogue is written in omniscient point of view of Nobu. Is this effective, or does it feel too easy?*

I liked the epilogue, especially the buried box and the haiku, and how the first-person narration tied in with Nobu's journal entries from the main body of the book. Plus, though he's shown to be radicalized in the book, the story succeeds at making him still seem like a good person inside, so it felt good to me that he got peace and understanding at the end.

While we're on the subject, I'd like to gently push back against the idea that easy = undesirable in a book. It can be very desirable! If the passage is immersive, who cares if it's easy! Readers will be too swept up to notice. If something feels easy to you, maybe that's because it's within the reach of the skills you've worked so hard to amass!

*To consider: PT might be enhanced by playing with pacing, especially in scenes of dialogue*

If there's one issue affecting page-turning for me in the MS as written, it's the pacing. I feel like the pacing is fast all the way through, with two main effects: it might be reducing atmosphere by racing me through the story so emotions don't have time to build up as much as they could. The other effect of the universally fast pacing is that I felt robbed of one of the key things readers crave in narrative: the sense of time alternately slowing down and speeding up again, over and over. Authors can sometimes think that readers read primarily for the content. But alternations in pacing are a ginormous factor in a reader's subconscious experience. Maybe even the biggest. Experienced authors know that while content is important, in certain ways all content is just a medium for the expansion/contraction of time that gives readers the addictive tension-and-release feeling that's so central to novels.

Our call touched on the idea that dialogue has a default quick pacing: if extra steps are not taken to slow it down, then each line is like the click of a metronome carrying the reader along. At the moment, this MS relies on dialogue as a primary storytelling technique, often having characters talk through what's going on with them. That's one of the things affecting the pacing for me. So, if there's one change I'd love to see in this MS, it would be to see the narrative alternating slow and fast pacing in every scene, including in scenes of dialogue.

"Expanding and contracting time" can sound intimidating, I know for a fact. We humans can naturally relate content to one another because we have so much ingrained social training with conversing. But influencing time? That sounds like sorcery. However, once you get the hang of a few simple techniques, it's not so hard. Writing educators give good, solid, actionable tips to help. For example, C.S. Lakin has a good article with specific tips about how to slow down time during dialogue: <https://www.livewritethrive.com/2025/09/16/5-strategies-to-pacing-your-dialogue/>.

To those techniques, I'd also add my favorite strategy for slowing down time during dialogue: replacing lines of speech with non-dialogue images, physical actions, and sensory descriptions. These substitutions give readers the same overall impression of the scene, but also the feeling that it's taken longer somehow than the dialogue-dominant version..

Here's an example from page 61 of the MS. The original, fast-paced version of the dialogue is:

“But, why ain’t Paul going with you?” Jubie had asked.

“Well,” Sachi replied, still biting her nail, “He doesn’t exactly know I’ve agreed to meet Terrence.”

“What? Why ain’t you telling him?”

“I will . . . after the meeting. That is, if everything goes all right.”

“Girl! I still don’t get why you ain’t gonna tell him.”

“Oh, Jubie. Paul’s been full of questions. Why don’t you just go see Terrence? When are you going to go see Terrence? What are you going to say to Terrence? It’s just too much. I know he’s just trying to help, but I need to do it in my own time, in my own way. Understand?”

“Yeah, I guess. But, he only asking you all them questions ’cause he loves you.”  
*Heck, what I wouldn’t give for a man to love me like that.* She rolled her eyes. “I hope he don’t get mad once you tell him.”

“Well, I’m not sure I’ll even tell him if it doesn’t go well. And if it does go well, he’ll be happy I finally did it.”

Here, there are some non-dialogue storytelling techniques with reported thought and physical responses like Jubie's eye rolling and Sachi's nail biting. But other than that, the pacing rockets ahead. Here is what the same scene looks like if I remove non-essential dialogue and replace it with physical actions and sensory detail:

“But, why ain’t Paul going with you?” Jubie had asked.

Sachi continued to bite her nail.

“What? Haven't you even told him?”

“I will . . . after the meeting.” She was watching her own feet move over the pavement. Cigarette butt... shred of newspaper... her left shoe was scuffed on the side. Hmm. She'd have to take care of that soon. She held her breath as they passed a sewer grate.

Jubie crossed her arms and shook her head. Her feet kept pace with Sachi's, but she had to keep speeding up.

A few moments later, she stopped short as Sachi halted in the middle of the sidewalk. Passersby said "Watch out!" and "Hey!" as they tried to avoid bumping the two women with their strollers and packages. Jubie put her arm around Sachi and guided her to the side so others could pass.

Sachi looked embarrassed, but not about the passersby, whom she barely noticed.

“He's got these questions,” she said, shaking her head. “Why don’t you just go see Terrence? When are you going to go see Terrence? What are you going to say to Terrence?”

Jubie smiled and shook her head. *Heck, what I wouldn't give for a man to love me like that.* “I hope he don’t get mad once you tell him.”

"Tell him?" Sachi scooted out of the way of a lordly-looking white couple with an especially wide stroller who gave her and Jubie a look.

"If it does go well, he'll be happy I finally did it."

Here, I tried to get rid of as much dialogue as possible while still giving readers a basic sense of what the conversation was about: Sachi's secretiveness and Jubie's envy. The dialogue is replaced with images that raise tension: Litter, the smelly sewer grate, holding her breath, Sachi's increasing pace, the passersby almost bumping into them, and the judgy white couple with their big stroller. Time slows down because our brains are forced to imagine the physical processes unfolding.

In most of the book, the dialogue is already getting broken up to make it take longer. That's great for suspense related to content, but it doesn't exactly create the "expansion" and "contraction" feeling I'm talking about. To me, that's because the breaking-up is not interspersed with physical processes unfolding, but with thought, which unfolds at a similarly quick pace to dialogue. See this passage on pages 127-128:

She leaned across the table and touched his arm. “Well, that’s just silly talk. What makes you say that?”

He wiped his nose with his napkin. “Those jerks couldn’t get over the fact that Carter and me were friends—that Carter could be friends with a black man.”

In that moment, Jubie felt kind of ashamed that she was thinking about karma. Of course, she’d never admit it. But was it only a coincidence that years after Terrence had beaten up Sachi’s daddy, he’d lost someone he cared about to a beating? Didn’t matter. All she knew was she felt terrible for his pain and wanted to say something—anything—to comfort him.

“I only got two things to say to that, Terrence. One, you wrong about that. No way was it your fault, and I betcha if Carter’s looking down from heaven right now, you best damn well watch out for thunderbolts for blaming yourself.”

That drew a tiny smile.

“Two, I didn’t know Carter, but if he was a friend of yours, then I’m sure to his last breath, he had no regrets and wouldn’t have changed a darned thing.”

Karma. She couldn’t get karma out of her head. Everything happens for a reason—that’s what Auntie Bess always said. What was the reason here? She knew the reason was there, banging on the door to get out, until finally, it busted the door right down.

“Oh! And here’s a third thing I got to say. You believe in karma?”

Here, there are some good time-extending physical things: Jubie leaning across the table and touching Terrence's arm, Terrence wiping his nose, and the tiny smile. But the other breaks in the dialogue are filled by thought, which goes by as quickly, or perhaps even more quickly, than the dialogue. Replacing some of the thought with physical actions and sensory description can slow the pace and give the "time expanding" feeling. Here's a rough sample rewrite of the same passage:

She leaned across the table and touched his arm. “Well, that’s just silly talk. What makes you say that?”

He wiped his nose with his napkin. “Those jerks couldn’t get over the fact that Carter and me were friends—that Carter could be friends with a black man.”

*Karma.* Jubie suddenly became aware of the bench's edges cutting into her thighs, a picnic table splinter poking into her elbow. The air felt cooler than it had moments ago. Her face felt warmer. She turned her face away from Terrence, trying not to let him see the flush. But was it only a coincidence that years after Terrence had beaten up Sachi’s daddy, he’d lost someone he cared about to a beating?

Terrence was looking down at his plate, shoulders slumped. He put his hand on the table as though he were about to get up.

"No!" she heard herself saying.

Terrence looked up. Her blush deepened. "No way was it your fault." She picked the splinter out of her elbow with a wince. "I betcha if Carter's looking down from heaven right now, you best damn well watch out for thunderbolts for blaming yourself."

That drew a tiny smile.

"I didn't know Carter," she said, rubbing her elbow, "but if he was a friend of yours, then I'm sure to his last breath, he had no regrets and wouldn't have changed a darned thing."

Suddenly, she remembered another picnic, long ago, and a woman with old-fashioned clothes and a country accent. Auntie Bess. Yes, it was Auntie Bess who'd always been the one to say, "Everything happens for a reason". Jubie could see her handing out plates of steaming food to the children, a smile in her eye, and now and then on her lips, too. She'd looked so much older than her age. Everyone had, in that generation. Was that from karma, too? What if Auntie were sitting with them, with her and Terrence, right there at the picnic table? What would she say about Carter?

Terrence was watching her, still half-smiling. She took a breath.

"You believe in karma?"

Above, I again tried to eliminate any dialogue not absolutely needed to get across the point of the scene: Terrence's feeling of guilt about Carter and Jubie's conflicted thoughts about karma. I replaced them with as many physical impressions as I could: first, the discomfort of the picnic table to mirror Jubie's discomfort in her mind, then picking out the splinter and rubbing the elbow to show a lessening of stress but also some awkwardness, then some physical impressions of Auntie Bess for a sense of reassurance, but also mixed feelings about what Auntie Bess might say about Carter.

The sense of "expansion" is now there a bit more, adding a little tension and release to the scene. And you know what, it turns out that wasn't the only benefit of exploring the physicality of the scene. It also led me to discover some new angles on the content itself. For example, using the picnic table to show Jubie's discomfort gave me the idea of Terrence possibly getting up from the table as what prompts Jubie to start talking about karma, despite her not being totally comfortable with applying it to the Carter situation.

A second example: exploring how I might incorporate more physicality into the memory of Auntie Bess led me to the ideas of 1) connecting karma with the suffering of that generation and creating tension through cognitive dissonance, and 2) wondering what Bess would say about Carter, tying the two layers of the story together a bit more strongly within the scene. Incorporating more physicality into scenes can have multiple benefits, helping the author explore the content more deeply and make connections between layers of the story, while also creating the tension-and-release feeling readers crave.

With your talent, I'd love to see what would happen if you explored replacing some of the dialogue with physical actions and sensory detail! The thought is exciting to me.

*To consider: Making sure to give scenes internal arcs*

Just quickly, I wanted to mention the idea of really making sure that each scene has its own internal arc. That often means having time go quicker at the beginning and end, and slowing down at the climax of the scene to accentuate the most complex and tense ideas and emotions. All of your scenes already have good PT! But making sure those arcs are really there and really intentional can add so much of that "real book feeling" to a manuscript.

If you like this idea and need a place to start, Chapter 20 might be a good chapter to practice on. All of the content there is good, especially because it brings in the gardening and the chrysanthemums. But could the chapter be composed to have its own rising action and climax?

Authors are sometimes surprised how fun it can be to go back into the MS and finesse scene and chapter arcs. It can be like a puzzle, rearranging what you already have in order to create maximum PT with a mini-climax. Plus, it's like catnip for readers. They can't get enough.

These webpages could help with ideas and techniques:

1. <https://www.thenovelry.com/blog/how-to-write-a-scene> discusses what a scene is and how an arc of change is an important element of nearly every scene
2. <https://www.deeplore.show/pacing-tension-structures/> describes the structure of scenes, especially in the section called Scene Structure for Effective Pacing
3. <https://www.deeplore.show/pacing-tension-structures/> is helpful in understanding how scene pacing works in various genres.

While we're on the subject of pacing, I wanted to show you this article Jendi recently found, purely because I thought you might find it interesting (<https://authorspublish.com/pacing-as-moral-choice/>)! Pass it on!

### **Topic: Genre expression (GE)**

*Strength: Clear genre expression as literary fiction > historical fiction > Civil Rights era > family drama*

Genre expression, I think, is underutilized by authors as a tool for immersing the reader, and, because authors tend to ignore it, it can end up getting misused by accident. For example, I read a lot of drafts where the genre identity keeps switching throughout the book. Every time it switches, PT energy is dissipated. A strong, consistent GE helps to keep readers in the book's universe from cover to cover.

This draft of *White Chrysanthemums* does a good job with genre consistency. I thought the GE was literary fiction > historical fiction > Civil Rights era > family drama. That said, keep in mind that a genre for a book can be described differently by different people, so feel free to use your own words to describe yours—I just wanted to present mine to give your thoughts something to bounce off of. What matters most is that the GE is consistent the whole book through. That's a major strength compared to the majority of books I see for critique and in North Street.

*To consider: Slimming the word count to maximize page-turning and genre expression*

I'm definitely not insisting on this, because I genuinely do enjoy all your plot lines for their own sake, but one thing that might possibly add to both PT and GE is slimming the word count by 10k or so. PT because cutting words can lead to stronger emphasis on a main plotline, and GE because "soft" historical fiction (character-based) can run shorter than "hard" historical fiction (which might go more in-depth with third-person meditations on conditions of the setting like historical facts, and might extend over 100k).

The reason I'm putting this discussion of word count in "genre" rather than "page-turning" is that genre identity might possibly be able to point us in the direction of what material is central to the book, and what is good, but possibly "extra" to the project. Some authors edit with the strategy that "what supports the genre stays, what doesn't support it gets pruned or rewritten".

Let's look at the genre identity I described above: literary fiction > historical fiction > Civil Rights era > family drama. We can break it down into its component parts and see what kind of content is often associated with which component:

Literary fiction: A focus on themes, with plot and character development shown to the extent that they advance theme development

Historical fiction: A focus on the historical setting (concrete descriptions, facts)

Civil Rights era: A focus on the particularities of that specific historical setting

Family drama: A focus on family relationships

Typically, genre expression will work from the top down: first, we prioritize the literary fiction identity, then the historical, and so on.

When I look back at the list I just made, I already know that the current draft has all these things. But what does it emphasize the most?

In the current draft, I feel like the family elements are emphasized the most, that is to say, the interlocking character arcs of each member. The thematic material is expressed by the family content (as in the important scene between Mama and Sachi where Mama finally decides to tell the truth and confront the idea of saving face, pages 317-318). However, to me, the draft still might be feeling like it's prioritizing the character arcs over the themes, in other words, the themes appear to the extent that they support the character arcs, which is the genre fiction approach, rather than the character arcs appearing to the extent that they support the themes, which is one way to describe the literary fiction approach.

As you know from our call, I love all the characters and their arcs. But at the same time, I can imagine a version of the book that prunes back each character's plot to just what advances the main themes. One of those is, of course, saving face. What would it look like to trim away all the material from the draft that wasn't somehow pushing the saving face idea forward?

For example, looking at the Jubie/Terrence plotline, there might be things that come with it that don't push forward the saving face theme: Sachi's tension with Jubie, for one thing (as on pages 207-209) or Jubie's jealousy of Sachi (as on page 113). Other parts of Jubie's plotline might be tailored to be more in line with the saving face idea. For example, what if the way Jubie pursues Terrence unconsciously mirrors a saving face strategy, and she almost loses Terrence because of it? If you think about that idea and it doesn't seem right, it might be a sign that the Jubie/Terrence love plot isn't as connected to the book's main themes as other material might be. But of course all of this is relative to a lot of other things, so I'm not insisting on anything here, just trying to demonstrate one way of thinking about how genre can inform editing.

Looking outward from Jubie's plotline, the way Nobu's drinking is handled might be made to push forward the saving face idea a bit more than it does: rather than Nobu strenuously trying to keep it a secret and the other characters strenuously ignoring it/covering for him, Sachi calls him out on it (308) and so does Papa (306). That might seem more realistic to me if the family had already been working on recovering from an obsession with saving face, but the saving face conversation hasn't happened yet with Mama when Sachi and Papa point out Nobu's flaw.

Taro's plot line with Mari and the pregnancy is good for showing how he confronts his trauma and the question about his bio-father. It also helps build Nobu's resentment. But is all of Taro's

story in the current draft pushing forward the saving face idea? Could some of it be trimmed back or recomposed to that end?

Another strong theme in the book seemed to me to be what Jubie says on page 292 about all of us needing to be on the front lines. For modern American readers, that theme might be even more universal than the saving face theme. What in the book is currently pushing that theme forward—starting in the exposition—and what in the book might not be directly related? Might there be any opportunities for the saving face theme to actually push forward the idea that we all need to be on the front lines for justice right now? (For example, could it be demonstrated that a character or two have to let go of their face-saving if they want to fight for justice?)

Sometimes, I thought I might be noticing material in the book repeating itself, and that could be indicative of a place where pruning could happen. For example, on page 117, Nobu wonders whether Mama is with her lover in Japan, but he also wonders that on page 8. And on page 115, Nobu wonders whether Mama sees her lover when she looks at Taro, and he wonders the same thing on page 281. I've found that authors can sometimes repeat things like this with the intention to remind readers of that emotional thread. However, readers will remember the first time and don't necessarily need to be reminded. Mentioning something only once creates an emotional undercurrent that stays with readers and can be used to create subtext later on. It might be productive to go through the MS with an eye to finding duplicate material, considering which location is the best one for it (for example, which location maximizes PT and GE?), and then trimming back the excess from the other locations.

All of these suggestions are speculative, of course, and depend on you agreeing with my assessment of the genre identity and what the book's central themes are. I just wanted to show how genre identity can be used to identify areas that might be pruned back, in case you are ever looking for opportunities to slim the word count. If not in this book, maybe in a future one.

*To consider: GE might be enhanced by strategizing differently on Papa getting shot*

Papa getting shot. We talked about this a little in our call. I initially thought about it as a PT issue, but after mulling it over more, I think it's more like GE. My questions for myself were, "Is there any genre reason why Papa needs to get shot? Does it push forward any of the themes? Does it express the reality of the historical time period?" For those questions, my answers were no. I did think Papa getting shot supported the family drama side of the genre, so that's good. On the other hand, though, maybe what happens at the march could go a variety of different ways and still support the family drama side of the genre. What seems central might be that Nobu unintentionally puts Papa's life at risk when he meant to be Papa's defender. To me, it's the "at risk" that counts, both for the family drama angle and the "we all need to be on the front lines" angle.

I can imagine ways we could have our cake and eat it too, supporting the two themes I identified, showing the ironic outcome of Nobu's fear and hatred, and increasing PT by making readers worry Papa has been shot... but not crossing over to the potentially distracting and theme-dispersing idea of Papa actually being shot. Readers could see Papa fall, and Nobu could see Papa fall. But only Nobu would leave the scene thinking Papa had really been shot. Readers could soon see that the shot had missed and Papa had only fallen. That could get the irony of Nobu's action in the picture without impacting the atmosphere or PT (though Papa actually getting shot might).

There might even be ways to finesse the scene to push themes forward. Throughout the book, we're told that Papa's attitude is *shikata ga nai*. I wondered whether that attitude of "it is what it is" conflicted with the theme that we all need to be on the front lines. What if, after hearing the shot, Papa tried to protect Terrence and Miyo, but tripped and fell in the process? That could show that Papa had reconsidered his attitude and decided he wanted to be on the front lines. Or maybe he naturally was "on the front lines" all along, and Nobu was right that *shikata ga nai* was only a mask (page 2).

Either way, I wonder whether, PT-wise, the book could do more to foreshadow Papa getting hurt, so that readers are primed for the worst when the shot rings out at the match. Maybe Papa gets a cut somehow, maybe Nobu accidentally injures Papa to a much milder extent at some point earlier, or what if Papa has a near miss with a car or something almost falling on him? Having just one of these things happen in the rising action could get readers anticipating another bad thing in store for Papa due to the rule of three we talked about in the call.

### **Topic: Target audience (TA)**

*Strength: A clear TA that overlaps well with book buyers, agents, and contests*

As with the genre expression, I was glad to see that this book also seems to have a clear target audience. The centering of the lives of people of color and the de-centering of whiteness, the repudiation of the internment of Japanese American citizens during WWII, the Civil Rights focus, and the timeliness of all three dimensions suggested a readership that is progressive, middle-class, multi-aged, and multi-racial.

The clarity of the TA is good for marketing, and it's also something that evaluative readers like agents and contest judges like to see. If you ended up trimming the word count a little, editing so that theme-building becomes a more prominent layer of the storytelling, getting more intentional about arcs within scenes, and adjusting Jubie/the deployment of humor in the MS (more on that

below), agents might be interested. I know you already have publication plans with the University of Arkansas Press, which is great. Just wanted to mention it.

*To consider: Jubie and the TA*

We talked about Jubie a little in our call, and I'd like to go back to that. I'm wondering whether the current portrayal of Jubie might split the intended readership. My concern is that readers who are progressive enough to appreciate the non-white-centered look at the 1950s may not feel good about seeing a Black woman being used as "comic relief". Beyond any specifics about the way Jubie is portrayed, "comic relief" itself can be a dicey proposition when it comes to Black characters because of tropes like <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/UncleTomfoolery> and <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/SassyBlackWoman>. Jubie doesn't fit neatly into either of those tropes the way she is portrayed, but still, the TA might feel better about a version of Jubie that's more dimensional, with the same depth of feeling and capacity for complex thought that other characters have.

One non-Jubie way humor could possibly be brought into a book is through the physical and sensory details I was talking about with pacing. Characters can witness amusing things in their environment, like what other people are going through on the street or in a restaurant, or interact with their environment in ways that create humor, like above when I had Sachi stopping short and almost getting bumped into by packages and strollers.

If the book needs humor, which I think all books do to some extent, why not spread it around more? Every character could have at least one or two funny moments to bring levity to the story and make them all more three-dimensional. Even Nobu might have some humor. Similar to how pacing can get under readers' skin by alternating fast and slow, using humor to create contrast with the more serious parts of the book and the more serious parts of each character can help deepen reader involvement.

Speaking of contrast, more contrast in Jubie's character could help intended readers feel good. Fair enough if she naturally has a good sense of humor and an instinct for dispelling tension. But what about giving her more emotionally complex and ambiguous moments? My rewrite attempt at the picnic table scene above had her being funny with the elbow-rubbing, but also having bittersweet thoughts about how the lives of Auntie and her generation aged them prematurely and whether that also "happened for a reason". I intended these thoughts to have an abstraction to them that could show something about Jubie outside the scene, even if the concepts related back to the scene's themes and plot. So simply having Jubie's internal dialogue/reported thought cover more emotional range/kinds of topics than it does now might help, especially if you could edit towards thoughts that fed the book's themes about saving face and being on the frontlines of the battle for civil rights.

I want to go back to the idea of the eye dialect being used for Jubie and whether it might put off the target audience (<https://www.thoughtco.com/eye-dialect-spelling-term-1690700>). Among progressives, eye dialect can be perceived to show condescension towards a character, regardless of the author's actual intent. That goes double when eye dialect is used for characters of underprivileged classes, races, genders, intelligence levels, or other marginalized demographics, especially when the author is of a different race themselves. Also, Jubie is the only major character who is given eye dialect, so it might also be standing out stylistically as a deviation. I'd caution against proceeding with Jubie's speech as currently rendered.

The most cautious and simple thing to do with Jubie's eye dialect might be to get rid of it. Readers won't miss it, and as far as I can tell, the book's major themes don't rest on it, so the story might not be impacted much at all. A more complicated thing, and more of a gamble, might be to show Jubie code switching depending on who she is talking to (<https://hbr.org/2019/11/the-costs-of-codeswitching>). But if the book's themes aren't pushed forward by the way Jubie speaks, it might be best to make her style of speaking more transparent so readers don't get distracted or put off. The code-switching approach might be better in a book where Jubie's style of speech was tied into the themes somehow. Also, if Jubie was going to code switch, then maybe other characters of color/multi-cultural characters would, too, like Sachi and Taro. That could be fascinating, but might take an impractical amount of reorganization in the current book. Making Jubie's style of speech less noticeable overall could allow readers to focus on the content of what she is saying and not feel like she is being singled out for a cosmetic difference (or having her style of speech be misconstrued as a humor device, which would be unfortunate).

We also talked about the mention of Jubie's dad's lynching on page 22. To me, and possibly to other readers, lynching is such a monumental and upsetting topic that it feels incongruous to just mention it in passing in the exposition. Lynching is one of those topics that maybe should be centered in its own scene/chapter. What about referring to Jubie's father's death on page 22, then getting into what actually happened later on, with Terrence?

## **Recommendations**

This manuscript has so many strengths in its content, structure, genre expression, and in how it relates to its intended readership. Potential avenues for commercial-friendly development might include:

1. Working to expand and contract time within scenes, especially in scenes that are dialogue-heavy

2. Taking care that every scene has its own internal arc
3. Slimming the word count with an eye towards reinforcing genre expression
4. Reconsidering how Papa getting shot might impact the genre expression, and perhaps re-strategizing
5. Reconsidering how the target audience might relate to the current portrayal of Jubie and making any necessary adjustments

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

## Exercises

Exercises. Honing your book's main plot focus.

1. Re-outline either the current version of the book around the six main narrative events:
  - a. Exposition:
  - b. Inciting incident:
  - c. Rising action:
  - d. Climax:
  - e. Falling action:
  - f. Resolution:
2. Go through your MS page by page and make an exhaustive list of the current characters and plot events. For each character and plot event, label them Primary, Secondary, or Tertiary. Let the list sit for a week, then look again. Journal for 15 minutes each on the following questions:
  - a. What would this list look like if I allowed myself only 1 main protagonist, 1 main antagonist, 2-3 secondary characters, and 3-5 tertiary characters?
  - b. What would this look like if my plot followed the 6 main narrative events?
3. Look at your book's focus through the lens of genre by answering the following questions:
  - a. What is the main genre of my book?
  - b. In my chosen genre, what kind of characters tend to be main characters?
  - c. What are some examples of a central plotline within this genre?
  - d. What kinds of characters tend to be supporting characters in this genre?

- e. What kinds of supporting plotlines tend to occur?
  - f. How can I use this knowledge to increase focus in my own book?
  - g. How can I give a nod to these genre conventions while making them my own?
4. Read this article about rising action: <https://www.nownovel.com/blog/rising-action-definition-examples/>. Then journal for 15 minutes on what the rising action might look like if it were shorter and contained only 1-2 subplots.
  5. Copy and paste the book's text into its own new document. Read through it, highlighting any material that does not directly support the main plotline. When you're done highlighting, delete the highlighted material. Let the now-slimmer document sit for one month, then look again. Does the material there point to any new ways forward?