

“Beta Readers-- A Novelist’s Best Friend”

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I found my three beta readers for *Things Unsaid* after I had spent considerable time polishing the story. Looking back I wish I had learned about the importance of beta readers at a much earlier stage in the game. Had I asked them to read earlier drafts, my story would have been stronger earlier in the evolution of my work-in-progress. Their comments were instrumental in improving both structure and character development in *Things Unsaid*.

Now I am working on my second novel, tentatively titled *A Perfect Match*. On the heels of the publication of *Things Unsaid* barely two months ago, I am in the midst of writing the dreaded first draft and am about one-third or 30,000 words done. It’s now time for me to start thinking of my beta readers, the two or three people whom I will trust with my first thoughts about the story I am developing. A very scary thing—naked exposure at a very early stage in development. Writing is so deeply personal. It opens the author to vulnerability, so sharing a fledgling novel with beta readers is a truly brave act.

Beta readers can save the writer a lot of time and energy in changing plot lines, character arcs, voice, and just about everything else in the elements of a novel. An insightful beta reader can be a novelist’s best friend.

One of my beta readers has to know about the writing craft: ideally, a polite, professional, and talented writer and editor. To maximize my time in rewriting and reconceptualizing the story, I need a beta reader who appreciates the genre my novel falls in. I will return the favor and be a beta reader for one of their manuscripts. Fair is fair, and I am only too happy to do this.

For my other reader or two, I want someone who can react as my ideal reader would. Someone who can tell me where the story drags, what characters are believable, what dialog pulls them in (and doesn’t). I want honesty but not brutal, destructive comments. I realized early on, that I don’t resist “killing my darlings”, even though *Things Unsaid*

claimed three years of my life to write. I just wanted to move on to my next story.

Now the tough part of selecting beta reader-- and listening to the critique-- begins.

Honesty:

If you want honesty, you have to nurture your beta readers by responding positively to their first tentative (and it is always tentative) misgivings about something you have written, usually in the very first chapter. If you can't handle negativity, don't subject a beta reader to the task of tiptoeing around the weaknesses in your story. Being a beta reader is difficult—first and foremost, because the beta reader may be a friend and doesn't want to lose your friendship. Also, all good beta readers do not want to undermine the confidence you are trying to sustain as a novelist. They want you to succeed.

The Devil is in the Details:

You want your beta reader to be specific. Comments like: "It drags in the middle" gives the necessary heads-up that something is wrong, but you need more than that in order to repair the writing. So, ask questions: Why does it drag? Is it because the character is not changing enough? Is the story becoming repetitive? Listen carefully, because other readers may feel the same way.

Critique means Criticism:

Every story can be improved, but that doesn't mean all criticism should be equally weighted. In the final analysis, the writer has to determine what feels right. Nonetheless, a fragile ego can block out worthwhile criticism that, if dealt with now, can head off being rejected later on or noted by professional book reviewers. Be a good sport and learn what the beta reader has in mind: both good and bad. If you are open to criticism, you will have learned another perspective that every writer should welcome. One caveat: if the beta reader has nothing positive to say—"This book is just dreadful. Don't give up your day job."--you should move on and find someone else who is both supportive and

analytical.

Comments Become Solutions:

Although the comments from the beta reader may require major revisions—for example, where there are plot holes or too many characters—you as the writer must figure out how to resolve the weak areas in the novel. Beta readers give honest criticism so that the writer can see where the scenes, plots, characters, can be improved upon and problems with the narrative solved. Beta readers' pet peeves—"I don't like anti-heroes" or "Sex scenes are disgusting"—are not at all useful if you believe both contribute to the story you have to tell. Following their recommendations would only crush your vision and voice. The beta reader who is your friend can be your muse as well: someone who understands the tone and voice of your story without trying to impose his or her own.

How do you find your ideal beta readers?

This is probably the most difficult task any writer has to go through, if the match is going to be compatible, even inspirational. Time and energy on the part of the serious beta reader are invaluable and I never take my beta reader for granted, just as I wouldn't my best friend. Even if I don't eventually incorporate most of the comments into future revisions, I respect the beta reader's undertaking and know that other readers will have similar reactions. So the beta reader prepares the writer for future responses and reception from book buyers.

One reader I relied upon for critiquing my writing is an author from my writers' group. The two beta readers I asked (from among my friends) were avid readers and book club members, just the type of reader I was hoping to attract. I was very fortunate that my three beta readers proved to be so conscientious and insightful. For writers who do not have that kind of network, I would suggest a shout-out on Facebook in one of the authors' groups or on LinkedIn.

Assessing the Critique:

I was able to meet with each reader individually to discuss in detail

comments and suggestions for revision on a regular basis, sometimes recording their comments. I only met with each of them, after digesting comments, comparing with other beta readers, and waiting some time to clear my head in order to deal with the more problematic issues. What can I say about beta readers? They are your muses, your inspiration.