

Critique to Help the Author, not Yourself

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I've participated in many critique groups over the last 15 years. My take-home has been in three parts: (1) I became more sensitive to weaknesses in the writing of others, and therefore became more sensitive to those same weaknesses in my own writing, (2) I have often found some really good examples of ways to write something that I had not been aware of, and (3) I've learned from other critics how to do a better job of critiquing.

All writers (nonfiction and fiction alike) need feedback on what they've written. "Feedback is the breakfast of champions." - Ken Blanchard and Spencer Johnson, co-authors of "The One Minute Manager"

The least expensive way to get feedback on your writing is by participating in a critique group. It's a case of "you show me yours and I'll show you mine." Well, at least in the clean sense of those words. You know what I mean.

One problem I've seen in many writers who first join a critique group is that they are very inexperienced in providing critiques. Many fall back on their reactions to the writing, which is not necessarily what the writer wanted. The critic tells the writer what she "would like to see more of" or "less of" in the submission. That can sometimes be helpful to the writer, but often is of very limited usefulness.

Why? Because the writer is really interested most in learning how to do a better job of writing the submission for her own goals, not what the critic liked or didn't like.

I think it is important for a critic to set aside her own preferences in reading and focus instead on helping the writer achieve the writer's goals.

For example, if the writer wrote a fiction piece that is supposed to be part of a mystery, the proper question for the critic to ask herself is: How can I help this writer do a better job of writing a mystery?

Likewise with crime stories, science fiction, fantasy, young adult, thrillers, suspense, horror, military, western, comedy, spiritual, etc. Each genre has its own preferences in content and expression. I believe the critic will help the author the most by providing

feedback on how to write better “in that genre,” not in telling the writer what the critic would like to see more or less of for “her own reading pleasure.”

The critique is not about the critic. It should be solely for the help of the writer.

Just as you the writer will sell more books if you keep the reader in mind, you will provide more help to writers in your critique group if you keep the writer in mind, rather than yourself.

Critiquing should not be showing off how smart you are, or the fact that you’ve got a masters degree in fine arts (MFA), or that you’ve written X number of books and supposedly that means you are an authority. No. The purpose of a critique is to help the writer of the submission do a better job of whatever the writer wants to achieve.