

8-6-2012

Jill,

What an awesome world you've created here! Once again, your worldbuilding skills are first-rate. I didn't realize until you told me that this was the story of Daniel and the three young men, but now that I've seen that, I'm even more excited about what you're doing here.

You're a great writer, so much of the manuscript is ready to go to print right now. However, I had a few things I'd like us to talk about to see if there might be room for some revisions.

First, I'd really like to see the opening 50 pages redone. It felt scattered, it didn't do a good job of establishing the world of the village (imo), and it wasn't engaging. You know I think a novel is strongest when it sticks with the main character for ~40 contiguous pages before cutting away (after a prologue, if any). I'd love to see you do that. I know this is a story with lots of viewpoint characters. But one of these guys is "Daniel." Mason, right? He's the main hero. The reader needs to know that. So I think you need to let us get fully into his skin before asking us to form connections with the other viewpoint characters. You'll see in the attached file more of my ideas about how to restructure the opening.

Second, the middle of this manuscript is sagging, imo. I'd like to see you find and expand your focus—which I perceive to be Mason's story, especially as he researches the Thin Plague—and let everything else orbit around that. Yes, you still need to let all your main characters have their stories, but I think that when you find your focus, some of the rest of what needs to be added and cut will become clear.

Third, I'd like to see you strengthen your characters. You're good with character development, but this time it feels like you haven't done all your homework. I couldn't tell you the difference between Mason or Levi or Omar or Jordan. True, Omar is insecure and Jordan uses colorful epithets, but those are moods or characteristics, not actual character cores. Same with Jemma vs. Eliza vs. Naomi, etc. They're in different situations or roles, and one of them quotes from *Princess Bride*, but again, that doesn't feel like true characters with authentic and differentiated temperaments. They all feel the same. I wish we had time to have you do the characters over again, truly develop them, and then rewrite the book accordingly. But we don't. So we'll have to concentrate on differentiating the characters but making sure they still do what you need them to do.

Fourth, along those lines, I'd like you to consider cutting down on the number of Glenrock characters who survive or stay with the story. There are so many, and they all seem so similar to me, that it's impossible to track with them. And they don't seem consistent even when I can track with them. Like when Eliza is happy and flirty, but then in the same scene you tell us that she's all about making herself feel miserable. I know you've got the chops to create great characters. By keeping the number of women who survive to like 5, things will be easier on the reader.

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Fifth, be sure to go back and retroactively add things earlier in the manuscript that you invent later in the manuscript. For instance, you seem to invent Jordan's colorful insults about halfway through the book, but I don't remember them at the beginning. You seem to invent that some of the Glenrock characters say, "Mad good" or the like, but I don't remember them saying that earlier. You seem to have the idea midway through that there are yellow surveillance cameras all around, but there weren't any of these cameras earlier in the manuscript. In all of these cases, if these things are supposed to have been there all along, they need to *be* there all along. Which means you need to go back and insert them into the story and into characters' mouths from the get-go.

Sixth, I was surprised at the mature content in your book. I'm wondering if Zonderkids (and, more importantly, the parents/customers who buy this book) will be okay with it. I've flagged the content several times in my notes just to be sure I've brought it to everyone's attention.

I think your overall word count will remain pretty much as it is after you've added a new and extended opening and cut out some of the stuff in the middle that goes nowhere, like Jemma's date with Otley and Levi's missions with Zane.

Finally, I'd like you to consider writing out a more formal, ceremonial wedding scene for the end of the book. It's rushed through now, almost like a quick blessing before dinner, but I don't think that's how it would play out. As I outline in the notes, I think these people, transported from their homes to this terrible place, would take this moment to try to recapture some of the tradition and normalcy of their homes. This will be this couple's only wedding, after all, so these people would do all in their power to make it special, memorable, and at least a little fancy—for the bride, if no one else.

I hope all of that hasn't discouraged you. You've written a terrific novel in a really exciting dystopian world. I very much enjoyed reading it.

As always, I'm here to clarify and help you brainstorm.

Jeff