

Dear Cindy Brown,

In *WHAT THE RIVER KNEW*, you have created lovable characters who are also complex and flawed. Following are some notes on what works especially well, and what could be smoother in terms of character development.

- Ster is our main guy, and he's an easy character to follow along with. His post-TBI struggles are rendered in ways that are easy to understand. It works that they're consistent throughout the book, instead of falling into tropes where everything will magically evaporate once the person is engaged in something. It is also great to watch his feelings about houseless people, sex workers, substance users, etc, to evolve. Ster is a good proxy for a lot of potential readers who could evolve their thinking with him.
- Ster's feelings about cops, cops in the media, and anti-cop sentiment could use some fleshing out. In many instances, it reads like Ster is unaware that there is any issue with cops, which doesn't feel believable to me as someone who lived in Portland in 2017 (with zero connection to police). It just seems unrealistic that a retired cop who was severely injured by neo-nazis while standing up for a Muslim woman, who had a daughter who went through an anti-cop-bias phase (Ster's description) would be so oblivious to national/local conversations about police, race, etc. Set in 2007 would be more believable but not 2017. It might strengthen both the believability and the character development to have Ster have a concrete opinion on the matter early on, and have that evolve once he figures out not only what Rich did but also how well-connected he was. It doesn't need to be a huge focus, could even be mentioned in passing here and there throughout, but as it feels like that aspect of Ster having any opinion on the matter feels too absent.
- Ster mostly reads as a struggling but fairly wholesome dude. However, there are several times when other characters refer to him as a huge asshole, as someone who can never admit when he's wrong, can never admit he needs help, etc. and it doesn't quite ring true with the Ster we see in the pages. Ster needs help a lot! He can be a bit gruff but doesn't come off like a ginormous asshole as he's sometimes described by others. To address this, you could either add in scenes or memories or moments that demonstrate Ster's jerkiness and refusals to apologize or ask for help, or cut back on other characters' mentions of it.
- Spidey is especially well-rounded. He has his demons, and he also has his past traumas and his soft side that likes feeling needed and helpful. You stayed away from the tendency to make a character like him (schizophrenic, a meth user, someone who grew up homeless) either too heartwarmingly sweet or too violent or out of touch with reality. It works that we don't ever find out if Spidey did or didn't hurt Jane; the reader is left to decide for themselves that maybe he did or maybe Rodney was messing with him, taking advantage of Spidey's struggles (sadly also realistic). The touches where Spidey is thinking very didactically about how to be funny add a nice character note.
- Bonnie's backstory could use some rethinking. It feels far-fetched or as if it was chosen for the novelty and the "get a load of this!" factor. It's jarring compared to the rest of the manuscript, which reads as pretty straightforward and grounded. There's also a lot of

back and forth about whether or not Bonnie is trustworthy because of what Harper/others overhear, and that could be something to consider cutting for word count. Most of the tug of war about people saying Bonnie is the mother of the world vs she's dangerous doesn't have a huge impact on anyone, and there's a lot more natural trust/distrust dynamic through Bonnie's actual interactions with Ster and the rest, when she lies and when she doesn't, to create that "is she trustworthy?" tension without needing any of the hearsay storylines.

- There was a lot of talk in our Pitch meeting about how the two people who are murdered in the story are both people of color. I wouldn't suggest changing anything about Luis, who is another complicated and multifaceted character, or even about his death - it's sad and tragic as it should be and it occurs when it should in the course of a mystery/thriller. However, could Jane/Aleesha be a white girl from Mississippi? That way it would avoid the "all the POC get murdered" trope while still preserving everything about Luis's character and arc.
- There are a couple places where there are inconsistencies in character groups. For example, Spidey's group is at first 4 people (Spidey, Zane, Rodney, and unnamed bearded guy) and one of them disappears after a few scenes. For the sake of clarity, it could work better to leave Bearded Guy out altogether or have him appear in more of the scenes with the crew.
- Similarly, I'm utterly confused about whether Harper did or didn't know Jane. In full disclosure, I went back through the ms (more than once) with a search for Harper's name, rereading all of her scenes, and still came away confused. At first, she doesn't seem to know who Jane or Lydia are, at all. Then Ster shows her a picture of Lydia, who she thinks she has seen at Story Time with Fuzzy (which makes sense since we learn later on that they were indeed good friends) but then all of a sudden she knows who Jane is, knows she never saw them together, but has still never seen a picture of Jane or anything to explain how she suddenly knows who Jane is.
- There are times the tone and the dialogue veer a bit too far into Hallmark or PG kids movie territory (annotated on my copy of the draft) which feels like too far a shift from the rest of the story which can read as gritty and has definite noir elements. I almost wanted the reverend to actually have a drug problem (when Spidey confronts him at the end) instead of it being a zany mixup. Sometimes the language feels too toned down for the characters' personalities and lives.
- The note at the end strikes just the right chord. We finally get a glimpse of Lydia, and the way it ends on her not being able to join Ster and others now but knowing maybe someday hits the right bittersweet spot and keeps the ending from toppling over into too much sweetness for the genre/characters. Really well done.

I can't wait to see what you do with these developmental editing notes (mine and others'), and look forward to seeing the next draft.

Chrys Buckley