WRITERS’ DIVISION

NATIONAL FEDERATION OF THE BLIND

Critique of “The Terrifying Night”

INTRODUCTION

1. The material submitted for review is a short story, and was received for that review on November 24, 2012.
2. The material was reviewed for format, writing mechanics, and general story writing style.

FORMAT

The author should be aware that when submitting material for publication or a contest, there will almost always be “writer’s guidelines” that define the format for the submitted material. For example, the annual NFB Writers’ Division writing contest requires submitted material to have: “each paragraph indented 0.5 inches, lines are single spaced, and having a 14 point font of Aerial, regular.” Those guidelines are for entries submitted electronically. Note that hard copy submissions are usually asked to be double spaced, and the font will usually be required to be 12 point Times New Roman.

Although no specific guidelines for format are given for material to be critiqued by the NFB Writers’ Division, the following comments are given to point out changes that would need to be made before submitting the short story for publication. Note that the vast majority of people reviewing the material for publication would be sighted, and visual presentation is important to them. Remember always to check the specific submission guidelines before sending off material for any contest or publication.

1. The material is single spaced. Any material submitted as a hard copy for publication, a contest, or review, should almost always be double spaced. Some electronic submissions, however, may ask for single spacing. Be sure to check the submission guidelines before sending off your material.
2. The font is Calibri, size 18, bolded, which is a non-standard font for submitted material. You should check the writers’ guidelines carefully before submitting material.
3. The paragraphs are not indented the standard 0.5 inches.

WRITING MECHANICS

When submitting your material to others, it should be done in a style accepted as normal for prose in American English. That includes sentence structure, paragraphing, punctuation of dialogue, etc. Also, the material is expected to be free of such basic errors as typos, correct use of capitals, correct spacing between words, etc. Based on that, the following comments are made about the submitted material.

1. Let’s look at the third paragraph of the story. There are multiple errors there, showing the author needs to pay more attention to detail.

“Yes it is a very pleasant day out today.” answered Lola, gazing about at the stunning scenery that lay all around her like the well kept bright, green grass, radiant yellow sun, brilliant blue sky, nourishing looking brown and green trees and much more. “Hey isn’t that Oscar and Aiden Ridgeland coming this way?” asked Lola, pointing towards two boys walking in their direction. Oscar and Aiden were visually impaired eighteen year old twin brothers who have peach toned skin, blue eyes and blond hair. Oscar has on a navy blue t-shirt, black shorts, white socks and black runners. Aiden has on a white plain t-shirt, black shorts and white socks with white runners. Oscar and Aiden were five foot eleven. You can tell the difference between them because Oscar has darker blond hair than Aiden.

The first sentence should have commas inserted as follows :

“Yes, it is a very pleasant day out today,” answered Lola, gazing . . .

The first comma is required for grammar, the second comma is the correct way to punctuate dialogue. Both the lack of appropriate commas (like the first one) and the misuse of the period at the end of that first quoted sentence are common errors in the story.

That first sentence is much too long, which is another common problem within the story. How about rewriting that as follows:

“Yes, it is a very pleasant day out today,” answered Lola. She gazed about at the stunning scenery that lay all around her. The well-kept, bright, green grass, the radiant yellow sun, the brilliant blue sky, the nourishing looking brown and green trees and much more.

Note also, you don’t need to tell the reader that grass is green, that the sky is blue, etc. That type of description is redundant.

Now look at the following sentence in that third paragraph:

Oscar has on a navy blue t-shirt, black shorts, white socks and black runners.

The tense is wrong. It should be “had,” not “has.” That error is made in the sentence after that, also.

1. A very common problem in the story is not placing the tags for who is speaking in dialogue in the correct place. Very often, who is speaking is only explained after speaking several sentences. The reader often doesn’t know who is speaking till the end of the paragraph. For example, look at the following:

“Hey girls, did you hear that a lot of people in this area are saying that the Assiniboine Forest is haunted at night? Want to come with us and camp out in the forest tonight to see if it is true?” asked Aiden, as he and Oscar walked up to them and then motioned for them to sit on the grass with them.

That should be written as follows:

“Hey girls, did you hear that a lot of people in this area are saying that the Assiniboine Forest is haunted at night?” asked Aiden as he and Oscar walked up to them, then motioned for them to sit on the grass with them. “Want to come with us and camp out in the forest tonight to see if it is true?”

Always try to put the tag indicating who is talking after the first sentence or part of a sentence of dialogue. Note also in the paragraph how changing a few commas made the paragraph read better.

1. The very next paragraph contains examples of a too-long sentence, the lack of commas, and the need to place the tag for who is talking in a better position. Again, these are common problems throughout the story. The paragraph reads:

“Yes we have heard about that rumour but I do not know if our parents will allow us to camp out in the forest during the night since we are not allowed outside at night-time because of safety precautions.” answered Lola, while glancing at her sister who nodded to her sister’s response.

The reviewer would rewrite that paragraph as shown below. The author should use the rewrite as an example of how to better handle dialogue.

“Yes, we have heard about that rumour,” answered Lola, glancing at her sister. “But I do not know if our parents will allow us to camp out in the forest during the night. We are not allowed outside at night-time because of safety precautions.” Her sister nodded back in agreement.

1. Another common writing technique which could be improved is demonstrated by showing the paragraph, as written, below.

“Well I know that they are not going to buy it for the reason that they can easily contact our teacher Mr. Adams to question him about this so I will tell my parents the truth and I will take my cell phone with me so if something happens to us we can call them.” replied Shannon, pulling her flip phone cell phone out of her black short pocket and showed the others it.

Again, the first sentence is too long and doesn’t sound like real dialogue, but let’s forget about that this time. Another common problem throughout the story is how the last part of that paragraph is written. It’s a question of tense. The ending of that paragraph reads:

“. . . replied Shannon, pulling her flip phone cell phone out of her black short pocket and showed the others it.”

That would be better written as:

“ . . . replied Shannon, pulling her flip phone cell phone out of her black short pocket and showing the others it.”

It should be “showing,” not “showed.”

Another similar paragraph is:

“What was that?” cried Shannon, in a panicked voice and jumping up in the air at that moment.

Note the ending of that paragraph when rewritten as:

“What was that?” cried Shannon in a panicked voice, jumping up in the air at that moment.

1. The author should be congratulated for having very few misspelled words in the story. Good job there!

GENERAL STORY WRITING STYLE

The following comments are made about how the story was written, excluding formatting and the technical end of writing such as punctuation, correct grammar, typos, and so forth. How a story is written, however, is up to the author. There is no absolute right or wrong when it comes to style. Therefore, the following suggestions are given from the standpoint of the reviewer’s preferred style, which might not mesh with those of the author.

1. The story starts out:

“One sunny, Friday afternoon on September 23rd, 2011 in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Lola and her twin sister Shannon were walking in the Assiniboine Park.”

Putting in the specific date is totally unnecessary. In fact, the only details the reviewer would put in would be that it was Friday afternoon, and they were walking in Assiniboine Park.

1. Mentioning that the two young ladies and the two young men are visually impaired seems immaterial. Nothing is developed within the story concerning their vision loss. In fact, the characters describe the environment around them as though they had perfect vision, which is actually confusing. In the reviewer’s opinion, the reference to visual impairment ought to be eliminated.
2. Again, describing every detail of what the girls and boys are wearing, hair and eye color, and so forth, isn’t really necessary. Why would the reader want to know what color of socks they are wearing? Also, is it important to give their exact height and their hair color? Wouldn’t it be satisfactory to simply say the girls were wearing shorts and T-shirts? And if you consider it, maybe even that description of clothing isn’t really necessary.
3. The reference to “peach toned skin” is used over and over again. First of all, that isn’t good style to use an uncommon term like that repeatedly, and secondly, the reviewer doesn’t think a Caucasian really has skin the color of a peach.
4. When writing dialogue, the reviewer feels using contractions better relays how people really talk. Contractions are used hardly ever in the story for dialogue, and give that dialogue a stilted quality. Consider the following sentence of dialogue:

“Yes we have heard about that rumour but I do not know if our parents will allow us to camp out in the forest during the night since we are not allowed outside at night-time because of safety precautions.” answered Lola, while glancing at her sister who nodded to her sister’s response.

That paragraph has been singled out previously for a rewrite, but now let’s look at it from only the standpoint of using contractions. That bit of dialogue would sound more natural as follows:

“Yes we’ve heard about that rumour but I don’t know if our parents will allow us to camp out in the forest during the night since we’re not allowed outside at night-time because of safety precautions.” answered Lola, while glancing at her sister who nodded to her sister’s response.

1. The reviewer felt uncomfortable when the parents are referred to by their first names. Since the story is written from the standpoint of young people, it would seem more normal to refer to them as parents, or mother, or father. Referring to these characters as Kathy or Johnny actually got confusing to the reviewer as he read the story. He had to remind himself those were parents, not another set of young people.
2. The writer should look over the story for unneeded detail. For example, the reader doesn’t need to know the sofa is black or the kitchen phone is red. A good writing style is to eliminate all unnecessary words. Try to remember the “keep it simple” approach.
3. The reviewer was confused about whether the “yellow machine with the red cords” was real or not. The story tells us the two boys used that machine to create the illusions of monsters in the forest, but the ending of the story tells us that the monsters were really there. To the reviewer, you can’t have it both ways. The monsters have to either be an illusion created by the boys, or they have to be real. One possible ending, with the monsters being revealed as real, is for the boys to later find out their yellow machine either wasn’t turned on or it didn’t actually work.

SUMMARY

Becoming a successful, polished writer is often a journey. In fact, it can be a long journey. That journey can -- and probably should -- include taking writing classes, attending writing seminars, and taking advantage of any opportunity to improve the writer’s craft. The author of this story is to be commended for taking one step in that journey -- placing this short story in the hands of someone else for review.

The reviewer has been writing for the last thirty years, and has attended many venues that gave critiques of his work. He has also read many articles in writing magazines that give guidance on what to do and what not to do. There may be some writers out there, like Ernest Hemingway or John Grisham, who had an inherent natural talent for writing, but the reviewer knows he does not. The reviewer himself knows he had to get feedback on his work to continue to improve the fine points of his writing.

To the reviewer, writing contains two main elements: the mechanics of writing, and the basic story or plot. The first element, writing mechanics, can and should be learned by anyone who wants to be a published author. Those techniques can be learned. The second element, story line or plot, however, has to come from within the writer himself. And perhaps that second element is what divides the amateur writer from the professional, successful writer.

In the final analysis, we cannot all come up with magnificent stories like a Heminway or a Grisham. Being a good story teller may not be something that can be taught. But we all can learn the mechanical techniques of writing.

The author of “The Terrible Night” has taken a step on their journey to becoming a successful writer. That is, by submitting the story for feedback to educate themselves. The author is encouraged to continue the journey forward.