

## Writing Critique Example - Holly Lisle

<https://youtu.be/SWGNCNBeS8eM>

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A head peaked around my nearly closed door. I saw panic in the eyes that looked back at me. Panic and cold hard fear. Kate was back and she was in trouble. They're always in trouble, that's why they come to me. I'm a writer crash tester. After 17 years and 32 novels of my own, I can shake down a plot, twist a sentence like a pretzel and slam a paragraph against a wall until it begs mercy.

I take no prisoners, I brook no excuses and now I'm on the case of a fuzzy thing. Kate needed answers and she needed them fast. She handed me a sheaf of papers and said, "I want the opening to suck the reader in and I don't think this is sucking." So I started reading.

'The first time it was a nightmare. I was seven years old and it was the middle of the night. when my dreams turned from a Queen's banquet to a dark hazy world which was all too real. It was like walking alone at night without any light but there was something more to it. Strange intrusive beings surrounded me and I cowered in their presence.

I awoke to a wet bed shivering and alone, and although it was still early, I didn't sleep again that night. I didn't tell anyone. Whenever I'd tried to tell mama my dreams in the past, not that they'd ever been anything like this, she'd always laughed at me and in the bright light of a summer's day this one seemed as silly as any of my other nightmare adventures.

The second time was much the same. I was nine when I wandered from a sunny meadow into the twisted reality of the nightmare once again, a little older but no less scared. I shrank away from other beings that approached me and longed desperately for my eyes to open to that wet bed.

This time I told my friend Alex, although not about the wet bed. Naturally, he told me I was weird and went back to showing me his wooden sword. It didn't happen again for a while. When it did I was 13 and

it happened a bit differently. I was reluctantly helping mama prepare dinner. I'd wanted to go for a ride with Alex and Kaliesha but Mama and Papa wouldn't let me.

So there I was shelling peas with an air of great offense and injustice, fuming to myself when the world went dark. Mom's pretty singing faded to an eerie silence. I could feel strange things coming toward me, approaching me, eagerly. I desperately wanted to get away to hide but there was nothing there, but then I was terrified, more so than before because I knew I wasn't asleep.

Panicking, I shouted at them to leave me alone and they did. I couldn't see them but I could feel them. They stopped as if surprised and then began to retreat. Before I had time to do anything more, I was back in the kitchen leaning heavily on the wooden table with Mama's arm around my shoulders and her murmurs of worried comfort in my ears.'

We walk away from this scene lost in smoke and confusion. What happened here? It raises its ugly head and it is a problem. We are told the first time it was a nightmare. We see that it was the middle of the night. We see that it was like walking alone at night but there was something more to it. In the same sentence, or in the same section, here we have my dreams turned all too real, and the word 'strange'.

We'll get into why those are problems in a minute. We cannot see, hear, feel, taste, smell or touch anything. The character awakes to a wet bed. It was still early but she didn't tell anyone because she says her dreams were different than they were in the past - 'not that it ever been anything like this' but we don't know what 'this' was like.

Move on; what is real to the writer must be real to us. We're told the second time was much the same but we don't have a clear feel for the first time. We're told about a twisted reality. This is a vague phrase. We're told about 'other beings that approached me'. Beings are a vague word and move on. For an instant here we have light clarity and action, not in the first sentence. There we have it 'didn't happen' and 'it happened' a bit differently.

But moving down into the second paragraph on the scene 'so there I was shelling peas with an air of great offense and injustice fuming to myself when the world went dark for a moment'. Here we get a sharp view of this kid. We know who she is. We know what she's thinking. We understand her then, it all goes away.

We are confronted again with 'I could feel strange things coming toward me'. Move on and in the climax, the climax comes and goes, and it leaves us unmoved. She yells at the things that are coming at her and they just go away. We have no feel for her fear. She tells us 'I was terrified' but 'I was terrified' says nothing. It requires us to believe her, to take her at her word. It does not show us.

So what we have met in this example is the monster 'tell' and we as writers must fear him. Fix number one, 'escape' from it and other vague pronouns. The writer's job is to make the world she imagines real to her reader. Concrete nouns give the reader something to hang on to. Instead of the introductory sentence 'the first time it was a nightmare' I used as an example 'that first time darkness devoured me and cold iced my skin and emptiness crushed the air from my lungs'.

Those are strong nouns 'darkness', 'cold', 'emptiness'. We understand them. Fix number two - kill the verb to be. You can use it occasionally but Hamlet's soliloquy aside, 'to be' is not the writer's friend. It tells. It says 'this is what is because I say so'. It does not show us anything. Strong verbs are 'devoured', 'iced', and 'crushed' as in my example sentence here, 'that first time darkness devoured me and cold iced my skin and emptiness crushed the air from my lungs'.

Fix number three - engage the reader's senses. You must be your character. Get inside his head. Breathe air through his nose and mouth. Feel his sunburned skin, the ache in his muscles. Taste the dried stale bread that's all he's had to eat, and bring it to us so that we are in him.

To my example here, instead of the 'strange creatures', I have 'tall pale creatures surrounded me crowding, close to me like too much smoke from a fire and like a fire smoke I could see them and see through them at the same time'. Fix number four - keep the character moving. This is a passive character. In three nightmares the only thing she does one time is yell. She does nothing else but tell us what is around her.

Characters to whom things happen bore readers. Characters who act intrigue readers. My example from her third encounter - 'I fought to break free of the darkness' to force air into my lungs' to move my frozen limbs but I could not so I stared into their glowing eyes and willed their hands off my skin. Willed them back from me with my anger and my hatred. Back half an inch. Back an inch. Back a step, then two steps. I willed them gone and without warning they were.'

The biggest fix, however, is the fuzzy thing and this comes from the writer not knowing clearly what it is she's writing about before she starts to write. Know what's in your world before you write it. Don't

describe the monster, and by monster I mean whatever it is you have to describe, or put in front of your reader on page one but describe it to yourself beforehand so that you know your monster inside and out.

Strange is not a writer's word. My example here - 'smoke', 'dense body 10 feet tall', 'glowing eyes', 'suckers on palms of clawed hands', 'no mouth', 'speaks telepathically', 'exudes fear', 'exudes cold', this is the way you describe the thing on the paper to yourself before anybody ever sees it. You don't put this in front of your reader, as such, but you know it's there, so that you can use it.

In the case of the fuzzy thing, you've seen a vague noun crash leaning on evasive pronouns like it in an attempt to heighten mystery. A weak verb crash - telling with is rather than showing with active verbs. A sensory deprivation crash - forgetting to figure out what the writer would do and feel and see and think and hear in a similar situation. An action crash - the character watches without acting and a visualization crash - not knowing the monster well enough. Crash tests- I do them because all writers make mistakes. Working writers learn how to fix them. Learn to crash test your own writing. From me, Holly Lisle novelist, writing teacher, writer crash tester.