

## **Authors of the Flathead**

### **Guidelines for Open Readings**

Welcome to Authors of the Flathead. Our Open Reading sessions are open to members and non-members and writers of all styles and genres. Please follow these guidelines if you wish to read and receive feedback for your writing.

The author should provide hard copy pages at the time of the reading so that he/she can take written comments home to ponder further. Generally, 5 copies plus a reader's copy is a good number. Please limit your selection to no more than 6 pages, and follow these formatting guidelines (which fit the format that is often accepted by agents and editors).

- Double spaced
- A one-inch margin, which allows space for comments
- A 12 point, typewriter style font, such as Times New Roman
- A header/footer which includes the author's name and page numbers.
- Pages may be double sided

If your reading runs full length on all pages - especially if double sided - it is a good idea to provide an extra blank sheet with each set of pages so that listeners have space to write comments.

Open Readings are generally planned at two hours. Listeners and especially those who are receiving feedback should be prepared to stay at the meeting until all have read. Depending on the number of authors wanting to read work, the moderator may limit the time spent on each piece, and you may receive more or less feedback as time allows.

Priority will be given to those who are paid-up members and those who drive considerable distances to read.

To help your listeners better understand your piece, you may provide a short overview, no more than half a page long. (Writing the overview is a good way to practice your synopsis writing!) If applicable, tell the readers where you are in the story, such as 'halfway through', or 'just after the father returns from vacation in Liberia.'

If you have a specific question or want the group to focus on a certain area (such as dialogue, characters, choreography), make this apparent before you begin to read. However, it is not necessary to be able to articulate any specific need.

Be sensitive to the possibility that the content or language of your creative work may offend some listeners. If you think your work may be considered offensive, issue a warning so that readers may excuse themselves if they wish. If you find someone else's work offensive, you may decline to critique it. However, literature is vast and dynamic in its composition. We ask that you understand that each segment of Open Reading is about the author who is reading at that specific time. The focus is on them and not on you. So extend to them the same respect you would want for your own work.

### **Reading Your Work and Receiving Feedback**

When you are finished reading, simply listen or take notes. Don't argue, explain or defend. Having a reader react immediately and say what worked and what didn't is quite valuable. If you explain too much, you dilute the reaction. That reaction is, after all, one of the main reasons you have come to Open Readings.

Don't be intimidated by the writing ability of your fellow group members. Try not to judge based on whether or not a writer is published or not published. Good writing conveys a story; it entertains and does so without grammatical errors and typos. That's it.

Accept everyone's comments as they are. It may be difficult to hear that your work needs improvements, but hearing these comments, taking them in, pondering them, and finally doing something with them is the best and quickest way to improve your work.

When the last person has commented on your work, thank everyone for their feedback, even if you didn't agree with a word anyone said. Stay calm and think about what was said. You are the one who decides what works for you and your writing. Keep a firm hold on your style and voice and remember that every comment doesn't necessarily improve your work but every comment, if it was offered honestly, has some value. You came to Open Readings to be critiqued, so take it! And have fun.

Remember that receiving criticism is never easy. What is said is a comment on your work, not on you personally. Don't interrupt, and don't defend your work. This is a critique, not a debate. Be polite and remember to say thank you.

### **Offering Feedback to Other Authors**

As a participant in an Open Reading session, you are expected to contribute to the best of your abilities by providing feedback to the other authors reading work.

After a piece has been read, spend two minutes silently reviewing the work and making written comments in the margins of the handouts. During this time no comments are made. If you are done, please indicate so by setting your pen down and waiting.

The moderator will select someone to begin sharing his/her comments on the reading. Each participant has an opportunity to comment briefly on the work that has been read. We ask that you be as succinct as possible in your comments.

A wise reader is able to be honest without being mean or disrespectful. If you are new to critique, the simplest and most honest approach is to notice how the author's work makes you feel. Heart racing, sad, wistful, humored, or even angry or repulsed; the latter may well be exactly what the author was hoping for.

Observe the more experienced people to see how they comment. If you are unsure of what to say, simply pass, or say, "I have nothing new to add," or "all of my points have been covered." This is quite likely to happen if you're not the person to comment first.

Begin with positive comments. The world of literature is full of more styles and voices than anyone could count. The purpose of fiction is to tell a story, period. So with this in mind, appreciate the work as it is by reflecting back on what you liked, what resonated with you, what you remember (word choices, images, action, dialogue, etc.). Every presentation has some good in it. Find it, or as Thumper's mother would say, "don't say anything at all."

Note any confusion or problems you encountered. However, realize that some confusion will result because you're not familiar with the author's entire work. There are potentially hundreds of other pages you haven't read, and some confusion would be expected.

Tell the writer how the piece made you curious—what questions you have, what interests you, what you want to know going forward. But note: These questions are not an invitation for the author to explain the work, so you shouldn't actually expect your questions to be answered. If you want to further discuss the work with the author, do so outside of Open Readings.

Be sure to separate the character or narrator in the work from the author. Never refer to the character as "you" or assume that the story is about the author.

Comment on the work itself, not on what you think it means, or should mean, or how you feel about the work or its subject. It is fine to say, "I don't usually read this kind of book" and refrain from comment if you have nothing helpful to offer.

If you have a suggestion for reading that would help the writer (another novel, a book on craft) mention it in a note on the manuscript. Be sensitive about mentioning such suggestions aloud. If you have found a particularly helpful craft book, bring it along and show it to the whole group and be ready to admit how the book has helped your own craft.

Write your comments on grammar, spelling, and word choice on the manuscript. Don't take the time to point them out verbally. Also, when it comes to grammar, strive for accuracy. If you aren't sure, say so. You might write, "I don't believe you need a comma here." Don't just strike the comma if you aren't positive you are correct.

Try not to repeat points that others have made since this takes valuable time. If you agree or disagree with a comment, note it on the manuscript, so the writer will know. Try not to shoot down a fellow member's critique by disagreeing with it aloud. An exception to this might be if you are seeing an author breaking down as a result of too many negative comments or if another member might have been less than tactful in offering critique. Then it is encouraged to build up the author and restore group dynamic. This is generally the duty of the group moderator, but all should be sensitive to how a critique is being received.

End with something affirming and positive. We need to acknowledge the fact that the writer was brave enough to put his/her work on the line.

Again, welcome to Open Readings. We hope these guidelines will help you prepare for an enjoyable and useful critique session. We look forward to meeting you and hearing your work!

Thanks to Monica Poole and Rocky Mountain Fiction Writers. Our guidelines are based on theirs.

