

## CRITIQUING YOUR OWN AND OTHER PEOPLE'S STORIES

I ask students to write down their critiques as well as to speak them in the workshop. It helps the mind to unfold on paper some of the problems of a piece of fiction. Criticism and crisis come from the same word (which means to discern or to separate). Crisis used to be a medical term, the moment in an illness when the patient either lived or died. If you're in a workshop, or if you and your friends just get together every once in a while to talk about your writing, watch the progress of your classmates or friends' work very carefully, listen to how their work is criticized, and be moved by other writers who act intelligently on the criticism of their work. There is a crisis point in writing fiction—the moment when you stop listening to your own or other people's criticism. Below are questions to ask of your own fiction when you have come to a point where you need to make large-scale revisions of the story or novel. They are also useful for private workshops or formal university workshops when you write critiques of other writers' work.

- What is the story about? Write a thirty-word summary. Critics rarely realize how valuable a simple paraphrase or summary of a story is. A summary or distillation helps isolate essential parts of the story. It is important to describe the working parts of fiction in order to understand what works and what does not work. Hearing someone else's summary of your fiction is amazingly helpful—you know, in some ineffable way, what it was like to read your story, if the summary is well done.
- Are there places where the author tells rather than shows? Find at least four, and give the writer possible alternatives.
- Are there places where the writer shows when she should be telling, summarizing, or skipping over the scene altogether? Try to find at least two.
- Are there point of view switches? Are they effective? Are they necessary to the story or are the switches simply crutches to avoid showing how other characters reveal themselves through action, gesture, and unique expressions?
- Does the story start at its natural beginning, or should it start some place else in the story?
- What is the style of the story? What is the method of narration? Do the style and method of narration work in any way to increase our interest in the story itself? Is the style informed in any way by the vision and senses and character of the person seeing and telling the story?
- Are there places where the writer hurries through the telling? Advice: Slow down.
- Are the characters interesting, well developed, and plausible? Are the characters types we've seen over and over again in film, television, or popular fiction? Or are they full of interesting and unique contradictions?
- Are the sentences interestingly varied? Do sentences do single, specific tasks?
- Is the landscape, the setting, a major character in the story? Does the setting of the story play an interesting role in the story? Is the setting observed in a way that advances the story or plot?
- Can you find any clichés—phrases, characters, or incidents?
- Can you think of possible alternatives to the resolution, complication, or introduction of the plot? Can you think of any possible alternative motivations or behaviors or gestures of the characters that would make the story more effective and vivid?
- Does the story at one point, or at many points, surprise you (both as a reader and as its writer)? Have you let go of the strings long enough to see if these puppets will actually stand and dance on their own? Have your characters talked back to you, won an argument with you, or at least stomped off in a huff?
- Does the story offer us a satisfying and useful catharsis? (Catharsis, the term made famous by Aristotle in his discussion of tragedy, refers to the sensation of exaltation that can result from experiencing intense sadness or fear.)
- Are there any moments where the writer comes to a crisis point (when the story either lives or dies) and the story backs away from it or hurries past it? Find one of these moments in the story and offer suggestions of how the writer can better develop, illuminate, or deepen it so we have a better understanding of what happens in the story.
- Is the story philosophically and morally complex? Does it take on problems we are intrigued to read about?
- Is there a passionate reason for telling this story—does the story absolutely need to exist?

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