

CRITIQUE: *Book Title*

Clearly a well-researched book that gives a strong feel for life in these ancient times. I very much enjoyed the historical aspects of the book, I liked elements of the characterisation and the plot was interesting. You have a good turn of phrase, and handle language confidently. The concerns I have centre on the presentation of the plot – the focus on backstory, context and dialogue. But overall, there is much to commend in the book.

Audience/genre

The book fits nicely into the historical fiction genre, though as I explain later in this critique, I feel the ‘historical’ aspect is overshadowing the ‘fiction’ aspect in places.

Because the book is currently quite heavy in backstory and context and is complicated in places, I feel this would not appeal to a wide market. I can see ardent historical fiction fans and those with a fascination for Ancient Rome enjoying the book at present. However, were you to develop the fiction side of the book further and pull back on some of the context, the audience for the book may widen considerably.

Title

The title neatly conveys the period in history, so the reader can quickly situate the book in terms of setting and time.

The title also suggests that the empress is the focus of the book, so I expected the book to centre on her. As I mention later, I found myself feeling that, rather, Character X is the protagonist, and the book is more about him than her. For example, at the very end of the book you have the text:

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Character Z is most interested in Character X’s fate, not Character Y’s. So I did wonder whether the title needs to allow for Character X as the focus.

Writing style

Fitting of genre

Generally, your language is quite formal, which fits the genre. You need to watch for slipping out of the predominant formal style sometimes. For example, the odd modern-day colloquial expression/phrasing jarred a bit, such as ‘caught dead doing’ and ‘take with a dose of salt’ and ‘So let me get this right’.

Juxtaposition

You use contrast nicely in places in the book. I particularly liked the juxtaposition of Character A's letter and Character B's letter in Chapter X.

Humour

There are some touches of humour in the book which I enjoyed. For example:

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Hooks

I like your occasional use of hooks at the beginning of the book to create suspense, making the reader keen to read on to unravel the mystery; for example:

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The more suspense and intrigue you build, the better, so it would be good to see more of this kind of writing later in the book as well.

Tenses

You have a tendency to move between the present and past tense throughout the book. For example:

I told them. They nodded. I think they approved. Then they leave hurriedly.

Told and *nodded* are past tense; *think* and *leave* are present tense.

The whole book needs to be in the past tense. This issue can be resolved with editing.

Accuracy

The book would certainly benefit from a thorough copy-edit. For example:

| Current text | Copy-edited text |
|----------------------|-------------------------|
| XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX | XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX |

Also, in places I think you overuse settings. For example, you have two scenes side by side in which Character Y is sitting in her garden, thinking, and you have several scenes set in the courtyard (though if you bring these scenes together more, as I suggest, this is probably fine). You need to move action to different places where you can, and create vivid pictures of these places in the reader's mind.

Structure

You've clearly thought out the structure carefully, and I think its simplicity in moving forwards in time while moving between characters' points of view works well. There is the sense of the book building towards a climax, which is always important, though I would have liked to see more drama and tension building to a pinnacle at the end.

I particularly like your framing the book with Character Z reading the story at a later time (I would simply label these two sections the epilogue and prologue to separate them from the main book chapters). It gives the reader a sense of where the story is going and has been.

I also like the use of letters to provide information, the details of setting/time you provide at the start of chapters and your use of descriptive chapter headings.

The following sections outline my thoughts on specifics of the structure.

Chapters

I like that you've broken the book down into plenty of chapters. I did wonder, sometimes, whether chapters could be a little longer. For example, you split the first conversations between Character Y and Character X into several chapters, and in terms of structuring it felt like the pace dropped off because you went from moving the action around in each chapter to sitting still. I'd recommend bringing the conversation into one chapter, or possibly two.

It's important that chapters can stand alone in structural terms – that they have a clear beginning, middle and end. For most of the book I think you achieve this.

For example, here's a good chapter ending:

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It's a clear ending, and it signposts to later in the book.

And here's a good chapter opening:

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You plunge the reader straight into the action, immediately hooking their attention (although I did feel this opening also lacked some explanation further on).

Here's a less strong chapter ending/opening:

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It feels like you've inserted the chapter break mid-text; it doesn't feel like the chapter had a clear ending – a sense of finality or a good cliff-hanger.

Length

I think the overall length of the book is fine for the genre; I would be careful not to increase the length further, however.

Opening

I'm afraid your opening didn't grab me. I read the book blind (so didn't read the synopsis first), and it took me a while to realise the book wasn't about Character Z. The first chapter was too long, I felt, and was focused on Character Z's backstory, which didn't entice me to read on in the book. Then the second chapter is again backstory. So I was left feeling a little frustrated that nothing was happening – there was a lack of action, and it's really action that hooks the reader.

Ending

I liked that you came back to Character Z at the end. I'd have liked to see the penultimate chapter end with more impact as it's the end of the main story, and I'd have liked more connection between Character Y and Character X. Also, I think the final Character Z chapter is a little long – the true end of the book needs to be the end of the Character Y/Character X story, and this should be a short epilogue to frame the story.

Finally, it's good to try to make the last sentence of a book an important one, and at the moment I feel your last sentence lacks impact.

Point of view (POV)

First/third person

You use the first person narrator for both Character Y and Character X's point of views, which leads to the reader getting very lost as to whose POV we're in. For example, Chapter 2 is in Character Y's POV, then Chapter 3 shifts to Character X – but you don't convey this to the reader, and we feel like Character Y has suddenly switched locations/sexes etc.

It's rare to write a book in which two characters are narrated in the first person, because of the confusion it creates. The only way to do it clearly is to write the name of character at the start of each section where you shift. I don't think this would work in your book, though.

My suggestion is that Character X – who is the main character, and who is the writer of the manuscript Character Z is reading so is most likely to be the first person narrator – remains in the first person (I did this, I thought this), but Character Y is narrated in the third person (she did this, she thought this). You then strengthen Character X's voice and avoid the confusion.

It's a big job to revise the book along those lines, but it will greatly strengthen the writing.

POV shifts

You also need to watch for disorientating POV shifts. For example, in Chapter 1 you move between Character Z's and Character A's POV. Then from Chapter 5 onwards you move back and forth between Character Y and Character X's POV after just short bursts in each POV, and this structuring feels odd against the rest of the book's structuring, and is a little disorientating for the reader.

Plot

I enjoyed your plot, and thought it was intelligently written and realistic for the time. However, I think, as a novel, the story lacks a focus on action – that plot comes second to historical description. It took me some time to get into the book, because of the amount of backstory and context described at the start, and really what I wanted was action to grab my attention. For me, the best bits of the book were battle scenes, moments of emotional connection between characters and other action-led sequences, such as the young girl collapsing after being poisoned. I think you could develop more interest/tension/drama in the book. For example, take the following:

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This is a very brief, undramatic description of what is a very interesting and tense event; you could develop this to create more of a sense of action and movement in the book.

A technique I often recommend to authors is to imagine your book as a film. Think about how often characters are sitting about talking, and how interesting a viewer would find that after a time.

Confusion

Occasionally, there is some confusion in the plot. For example, in Chapter 15 Character Y visits Character X in his cell, but as she leaves she says, 'You can stay here until dusk and enjoy this place so dear to me.' This seems odd; I assume this has got mixed up with their conversation in the garden?

Another example: Character D says, 'The fact that Character M is ill – possibly also being poisoned, adds to rumours against me.' How does he know poisoning is suspected? Character X confided this to Character Y away from the others.

Characters

Development

I like your characterisation, but I feel you could develop the protagonists, Character X and Character Y, further. I found it hard to connect with them, especially at the start. I think more description of reactions and feelings and more indication of their movement in a scene will greatly improve characterisation; otherwise it tends to be that we're learning about them chiefly through dialogue.

Something I found problematic in the book is that you don't introduce the protagonists' names at the start. We don't learn Character Y's name until page 156, and Character X's name isn't revealed until page 316. It becomes hard to get to know a character when we don't know who they are.

Generally, though, I like what you've done with these characters. I like that you haven't tried to enforce 21st-century personalities on them – that both can be bloodthirsty and conniving. The names, I think, are excellent.

The chemistry between them could be developed further – although I know you aren't trying to write a romance novel, you could add a little more connection to pique the reader's interest.

A particular strength in your characterisation, for me, was the role of women in the book. Often in historical fiction set in these times that I read (especially that written by male writers) women have minor roles in the story. I think your exploration of the strength of women at this time makes the book compelling.

Protagonist(s)

As I mention in the earlier 'Title' section, I found myself feeling that Character X, not Character Y, is the protagonist of the book. Although you start out balancing between their two points of view, by the end of the book the focus seems to be much more on Character X. If you decide that this is indeed the case, it may be worth reviewing the book from that angle and strengthening the story through his eyes.

Realism

Occasionally, I found myself questioning how quickly characters told all about themselves to another character (e.g. Character Y and Character X in the cell/garden), and how realistic this would be. You do make some efforts to explain the openness, but through the book there are several examples of characters very quickly launching into detailed stories of their experiences without much lead in, and I felt this may not be true to life.

I also felt that sometimes you need more description of characters' reaction to dialogue – the dialogue tends to dominate, and we don't know how the listener feels about the words. So, for example, it didn't feel realistic to me that Character Y doesn't react (or we don't know that she does) when Character X first tells her that it was he who killed her brother.

Success in publication

I feel that the book requires some development before it could be of interest to a wide audience. The foundations – an interesting story, a fascinating setting and context, compelling characters, intelligent writing style – are there. For me, it's really about working on the fiction aspect of the book now so that it works as a jolly good read independent of the historical context.

Of course, publishers are notoriously reticent when it comes to taking on new fiction authors, and it's hard to get published in the current economic climate. But with further development and editing, I see no reason why this book couldn't be a strong proposition and an engaging, interesting read.