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JM Agency

Editor's Report

Fiction

Sample

I enjoyed reading 'XXXXXXX.' I liked the idea of interweaving two distinct storylines, which although at first appear unconnected, are gradually revealed to be intricately linked.

I also liked your sensual prose style (the 'faint redolence of cherry blossom off Kyoko's lips' is especially memorable). Your evocations of natural environments, the nocturnal Shinjuku nightscape 'enveloped in tears of neon', for example, are often very good.

Leo Reynolds is convincing as the privileged financial trader, haunted by his past, before resorting to addictions as a means of escape. However, after meeting Kyoko at the Harae purification ritual, his 'internal monologues' felt very repetitive and monotonous. His long-winded descriptions of his childhood, his experiences with Kyoko, and his looming bankruptcy, all felt tedious and long-winded.



While the opening three chapters (our introductions to Leo and Mr. X in chapters *One* and *Two*, and the Kyoko purification ritual scene in *Three*) as well as the novel's finale (the shocking revelations about Leo and June's past in *Eight*) were convincing, the material in between was static.

I expand on these observations and more below, which is divided into various categories. You will also find additional thoughts, ideas, feedback, and observations in the comments on the manuscript, many of which elaborate on my points outlined in this report, while others highlight specific issues within the text.

Writing Style and Presentation

You write very well on occasion, Paul – stylish, lyrical and sensual, with some gorgeous lines evocative of the novel's setting. I love this description from Kyoko and Leo's exchanges on pg. 61, *Chapter Three*:

The ghost of a past trauma haunted her soft, Honshuian eyes, which not even his love could exorcise.

There are some wonderful, lyrical descriptions of Shinjuku street life; the lurid taverns, the neon-washed pavements, and the noisy street vendors are wonderfully evoked, and you use metaphors, conceits and imaginative descriptions to wonderful effect.

You have a tendency however to slow down the pace of your writing with long and often trivial details. When Mr. X visits Erica in *Chapter 6*, I felt this was a perfect opportunity for a good, darkly humorous scene, which gives readers an insight into Mr. X



and Erica's relationship, but you instead launch into a long, lyrical description of Erica manicuring her fingernails. While there is some lovely descriptive writing on display here, one sentence for nail-filing would be more than sufficient, not two pages!

I also found some of the material on Shintoism, explored through Leo's conversation with Kyoko in *Chapter Three*, as well as the rambling passage about Shintoism in *Chapter Five*, a little self-indulgent. Providing the reader with a clear understanding of these religious concepts and ideas, including the Miko purification rituals, would have been more effective than reams of heavy technical detail.

On other occasions, the prose writing was surprisingly flat. On some occasions you used clichéd expressions like 'concrete jungle' (*Chapter One*, pg.8). On others, your descriptions felt a little sentimental and misty-eyed, as if they were extracted from a tourist brochure. Your descriptions of Hokusai prints on pg.37 *Chapter Two*, would be an example of the latter.

However, Mr. X's conversation with Yayoi Kusama (*Chapter Two* again) was interesting, and succeeded in communicating Frankfurt School critical theory in a clear and engaging way – although I would shorten it considerably, as you have a tendency to ramble on just a little. 'Less is more' is a good mantra in instances such as this.

While the standard of language is excellent overall, there are some examples of messy sentences. On pg. 104, *Chapter Five*, I have rewritten one of your passages, making some minor tweaks and alterations to the overall sentence structure. You will find this re-written example in the margin on page 104. The difference is not vast, but I do think it is easier to read than the original, with cleaner, more polished sentence-structure and expression. A



book with well-structured sentences will not only be easier to read, it will be more enjoyable to read.

The Storyline

Up until pg. 27, *Chapter Two*, when the handsome Kento arrives to give Mr. X a massage, I think the overall storyline is very convincing! Write like you did for the first 27 pages throughout and this will be a very good novel.

Up until page 27, everything that happens is significant, and we learn so much about the main characters. We learn that Leo Reynolds is a struggling trader, and, when he finally locates the elusive Kyoko, we discover why he has come to Japan; to investigate what happened to his sister who recently disappeared. We learn more about the shadowy Mr. X. We learn about his life in his palatial, Shinjuku penthouse, and about his criminal empire, including his rivalry with the Mexican cartels.

Until pg. 27, the book is a slowly unravelling mystery, with each chapter gifting the reader another piece of the puzzle – which makes for a very engrossing read!

At the end of *Chapter Two*, however, in a very predictable scene, we discover Mr. X is behind the Thamockamori cult and is responsible for June's disappearance. Giving so much of the story away so abruptly, in one short scene, spoils the suspense for the reader, and many subsequent chapters lack excitement and intrigue as a result.

Suspense is enormously important, especially if you are writing a thriller, or indeed one that 'marries aspects of suspense fiction and literary fiction', as you phrased it in your initial email to me. Keep your readers on the edge, keep them guessing. Throw in a surprise or a



plot-twist. After your reader finishes a chapter and puts your book down, you want them to say ‘I would never have thought of that’ or ‘I would never have guessed that’.

On several occasions in the current draft, however, the narrator tells the reader Mr. X is planning to kidnap someone, or planning to do something grotesque, in advance of him doing it. Consider the following example from pg. 83, *Chapter 4*:

Sipping awamori in his living room, watching the neon dance of manga characters on the shuffling billboard, Mr. X decided he was going to take him. The minute he stepped through those doors, the minute he smiled, let his shoulders relax, assume that look of Buddhistic tranquillity, he was going to transfigure him, initiate him into Thaimockamori, enable him to become something he is not.

I was pulling my hair out when I read that! I was thinking, ‘why are you telling me this’? Keep us guessing! Keep us in suspense, and when Mr. X finally commits some gruesome act, ensure it is something your readers would not easily guess, that it exceeds expectations.

Moreover, your dramatic scenes, the kidnapping scenes especially, involve characters that have only been superficially developed, which considerably lessens their emotional impact. Mr. X’s first victim is Kento, but the reader has learned very little about him, and he is quite a one-dimensional character.

When we read a dramatic scene we want to empathise with the characters involved, feel their pain - this makes it all the more real and gripping. We have three kidnapping scenes in your novel (not including Leo’s sister June, which happens before the novel begins) and the



victim in each is a vulnerable ‘damsel in distress’, preyed on by the ruthless psychopath. If you had one very good kidnap scene, where the victim was a well-developed character, someone the reader had time to get to know, and therefore someone the reader could empathise with, the later stages of the book would be far more impactful.

The beginning of *Chapter 2* is convincing. Mr. X’s abrupt suggestion that they switch roles, that he massages Kento, is a surprise, and a break from the predictable action-scene fare. You then jump forward abruptly, however, overlooking several essential details. We read how Kento is receiving ‘worshipful strokes’ from the shadowy Mr. X. However, what was Kento’s initial reaction to Mr. X’s suggestion that he assume massage duties? Was he shocked? What was going through his head? Was he unnerved or slightly uncomfortable with the customer’s request, only eventually consenting to it after some persuasion from X? You need to include this to ensure Kento is believable to the reader. Think how a real person would react and behave in this situation and capture that on the page; the more real Kento feels to the reader, the more effective and impactful this scene will be.

Throughout the chapter, Kento felt one-dimensional. X eventually drugs Kento, injects him with an anesthetic, but you skip over the action quickly, with Kento not putting up much of a fight. When it comes to dramatic scenes, it is all the more gripping if the reader cannot guess the outcome, if the writer includes some convincing twists and turns before the eventual conclusion. The Kento scene would be far more satisfying if, for instance, Kento fought back, made a run for it, or had a reasonable chance of escape. In this case, the reader is more likely to be on the edge of his or her seat, guessing what will happen, and praying for the best. A quick conclusion could be OK for the first disappearance, but all



of Mr. X's subsequent crimes follow exactly the same pattern, they are all over in about half a page and they all follow the same course.

Character Development

Outside of Leo and Mr. X, the only substantially developed character is Kyoko. However, after *Chapter Three*, we never see her again, outside of Leo's own private recollections, where she features prominently.

Kyoko clearly has affection for Leo, even though she is exploiting him, revealing to the reader that the Shinto purification ritual is a fraud and her Miko status is dubious.

Considering the revelation in *Chapter 8*, and how essential Kyoko is to the overall storyline - she, after all, was with Leo when he and June first met Mr. X, I'm surprised we don't see Kyoko again after *Chapter 4*. I don't think this will work, Paul. Kyoko is indispensable to the story you are telling here, we need to learn more about her, and she must have an impact on events; she can't simply appear in *Chapter 4* briefly and disappear for good. Besides, she is one of your most believable and memorable characters, so I would really use her.

I think June, Leo's sister, is a very important character as she is the only one of Mr. X's victims we get to know and she is the reason Leo decided to return to Tokyo. I think you should consider changing tactics here. Rather than the reader getting to know June through Leo's elaborate recollections, consider writing full scenes in the past-tense, scenes that feature June. I feel the reader would learn so much more about June through dramatic scenes, as opposed to recollections in Leo's head. Moreover, I think chapters *Three*, *Six* and *Seven* are your weakest, so this is a real opportunity.



In *Chapter Six* for example, you have Leo recollect an incident from his childhood that features his sister. It's written in 'internal monologue' style, with Leo's recollections interwoven with his 'present-tense' conversation with Masaki.

I think these recollections are interesting and important for the storyline. They reveal Leo and June's early interest in Harare, the role the Yurei play in the story, and their connection to Mr. X. They are also gripping and dramatic. The conclusion, that the Yurei (these 'spectral ancestor spirits') are not as ethereal as we had been led to believe, is shocking, and much of the story crystallises here.

You could consider writing this as a scene in its own right, as opposed to one character's recollection of events. There is more than sufficient suspense and drama here to warrant a scene. Moreover, it may help bring June to life as a character. If the reader can read how she looks and reacts at these crucial points, in conversation with significant characters, like Yukie, the 'enchantress', she may come to life as a character, just as Kyoko came to life in *Chapter Three*.

In *Chapter Six*, Leo finally locates June's last boarding house, her 'konji', in seedy, rundown Golgen Gai, Shinjuku. While your evocative descriptions of the streets and surrounding environment are convincing, your description of the actual apartment itself was disappointing. Inside June's flat, everything seems implausibly cosy and innocent: the family photographs and framed graduation pics adorning her Shinto shrine are implausibly wholesome. You told us in *Chapter Two* that June was a heroin user, sex worker and manic depressive, and clearly involved with some very dangerous people. Moreover, at this point in the book we know both Leo and June have suffered some serious childhood trauma. In



light of this, her apartment seems implausibly rosy to me. I would advise working on June more.

Leo Reynolds is convincing as a character. I enjoyed his sharp and acerbic reflections on life and work. Examples would include his observations on airports (*Chapter One*) the cultural contrasts between East and West (*Chapters Three & Four*) and his reflections on dealing with grief (*Chapters Four & Eight*). His insights into international finance in *Chapter Six*, including his views on Mr. X's illegal dabbling in arms trading and money laundering are interesting, but I would stop after 'another Barbadian shell company' on pg. 152, and incorporate some of the cuts I suggest in the annotations - you have a tendency to ramble on a little.

There are one or two nice observations in *Chapter Six* (the idea that Tokyo itself is one big, ghostly Yurei is lovely) but I feel that this, along with one or two other observations I have marked on the manuscript, could be included elsewhere. Remember, a character's internal thoughts and reflections are often more interesting when part of a dynamic scene, rather than simply static recollections and musings. For instance, compare Leo's reflections on airports in *Chapter One*, which come to him while driving through Tokyo, pursuing the mysterious Mr. X, to his long-winded reflections on Shintoism in *Chapter Six*, where nothing is happening and everything feels static. The latter is far more riveting for the reader.

Mr. X is also an intriguing and convincing character. On occasion, he reminded me of Bret Easton Ellis' monstrous Patrick Bateman (*American Psycho*) although Mr. X is, despite his career as a high-flyer, more of an 'intellectual psychopath' in the cast of Thomas Harris' Hannibal Lecter.



I would however have liked to have seen Mr. X developed more in subsequent chapters. After his conversation with Kasuma, his only interactions, until *Chapter Eight*, are with his three kidnap victims, and, as I mentioned previously, the dialogue in these scenes is flat and the characters a little one-dimensional. After *Chapter Three*, we need better Mr. X dialogue, interactions with more substantial characters, and involvement in more dramatic, dynamic scenes, to really get to know Mr. X and for him to come to life as a character.

Conclusion

Your manuscript shows considerable promise Paul. The overall concept of a slowly unfolding mystery was perfectly executed until pg. 27. After that point, you introduced too many one-dimensional, secondary characters, and there were far too many abstract reflections/recollections and commentary from the narrator.

Rather than three predictable kidnapping scenes, all of which lack suspense, I would consider other ways you could explore Mr. X. Ideally, explore ways of giving readers a better understanding of the Thaimockamori cult. In *Chapter Four*, in one abrupt, predictable scene, we discover the cult is a front for a trafficking ring, but, disappointingly, we learn very little else about it despite its significance to the overall story.

Perhaps Kento escapes? Perhaps X suggests to Kento another meeting? Perhaps, in the course of Kento's 'initiation', the reader receives a glimpse into the inner workings of Thaimockamori, which keeps the reader guessing and trying to piece everything together. This could make the conclusion in *Chapter Eight* far more satisfying and shocking.



These solutions may not work for you Paul, but I do think solutions are needed. Up to pg. 27, *Japanese Noir* showed real promise, but there are some issues to address thereafter, including some flat writing and predictable plotting, that take from an otherwise impressive draft.

If you have any questions, or if any of my points need further clarification, please do not hesitate to reach out, and do reserve a consultation with me when you can. This will give us an opportunity to go through the draft's strengths and weaknesses together.

You have the beginnings of a great novel here Paul. Let's work on it together!