

Detective Work: The Value Of An Effective Critique

Susanne Marie Knight, Outreach RWA

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I never would have seen it myself. How could I have? To me, my Viking: a massive, blonde, mountain of a man, and my shopkeeper: a pudgy, middle-aged deferential sort, were as different as they could be. Both were secondary characters that helped move the story along. Both came from different worlds. Separate, distinct, *different* men.

Physically, they were. But then, why were these two men critiqued as being too similar?

Similar! My first reaction was to sit with mouth gaped open. My Viking and my shopkeeper the same? Impossible! However, *I* was *too* close to the story to see the connection. After all, I knew they were separate men, but my readers didn't. My readers depended on me to make these two men live and breath. Somehow I'd failed in depicting two of my minor characters.

Some detective work was in order. I reviewed their speech patterns. The Viking came from a higher social class than the shopkeeper. Not an aristocrat, but a land-owner. I believed I authentically portrayed his speech patterns. The shopkeeper was easier. He had an even more informal mode of speech, plus he heavily sprinkled "sirs" and "your lordships" in his dialogue. No, the similarities couldn't have been because the men talked or sounded the same.

Next step: maybe it was their actions. The Viking was rough and coarse in his manners, when he chose to act that way. The shopkeeper was always polite. His job was to serve, which he did admirably well. Again, the men's actions seemed independent of each other.

How about the way they dressed? This idea had merit. The Viking wore loud, color-clashing clothes. He stood out in a room not only because of his size, but because of the bizarre colors of his apparel. The shopkeeper dressed soberly, as befitting one of his station. But, on one occasion, he had to dress as "Quality," and wore a costume that belonged to an earlier century. As a result, he also stood out in a crowd.

I shook my head. This couldn't be the only reason my critiquer thought them similar.

Rereading the scenes, I finally saw the connection. Both were congenial, good-natured, and simple men. My Viking was an obliging sort of fellow; my shopkeeper had a heart of gold.

Bingo! This was it. I now understood why these two weren't working for the critiquer. A few revisions later, and my Viking and shopkeeper were no longer Siamese twins¾joined at the heart. Hopefully, they now read as distinct personalities.

This is why having a critique of your work is so important. We, as writers, sometimes have tunnel vision when it comes to our work. Inside our heads, we know what motivates our characters; we know who's who, what's important, and what's not. Our job is to let the reader into our world¾to describe all our characters so that the reader also participates in the action. A fresh viewpoint helps spot problem areas¾before you submit your manuscript. With that extra help, plus a little detective work, your creation on the written page will more likely duplicate the story you have in your mind.