

Writers tips, by Chris Else

Chris Else is a novelist, short story writer, editor, literary agent and writing consultant.

The usual values that we all look for in a novel or story include things like **good characters, an apt and original style, consistent motivation, an interesting plot**. For me, the next most important things, the qualities that start to make a real difference can be summed up in four ideas:

- **Clarity**
By clarity, I mean not only words which bring out character, scene and event sharply but also the elements or details of what is described, the particularities. It is hard to give examples of this because any detail is particular to a story. The fact that there are cat scratches in the upholstery of a chair might be exactly what you need in one story but might clutter up another. I think, though, that getting the particularities right is as important as getting the exact word or the precise image
- **Coherence**
Coherence to me is the manner in which the elements of the story work together, the absence of arbitrariness in the essential features. If, for example, there are two lovers having an argument on a yacht in Cook Strait, then I want to feel that this story could not have occurred anywhere else - not on a tramp through the bush, not on a plane flight to Auckland, not on a ferry in the English Channel - or, at least, if it did occur somewhere else, it would be a different story in important ways
- **Depth**
Depth has two aspects. One is the sense of things working beneath the surface of the story, the subtleties and interconnections of emotion, motivation, theme, symbol, thought or feeling. The other is depth, or complexity, in the reader's reaction. It is one thing to have all sorts of interesting things going on in the background of your prose but if your readers just end up scratching their heads, you haven't achieved much. Depth comes partly from coherence and partly from understatement, the art of saying more with less. It is the quality in the story that keeps you thinking about it or feeling it (just as important) long after you have finished it. Its opposite is not just shallowness but also vacuum - the sense that there is a hole in the centre of the story
- **Development**
If a story shows development then, to my mind, it has movement, significant change, and a sense of shape. It has to finish up somewhere different from where it starts and that movement has to matter for whatever it is which is the prime focus of the story. If the story is about a particular character, then the development has to be to or for the character. If it is an idea, then the development has to be to the idea. Say for example one of the points of a story is that the central character will never change in a certain way. In this case, the development may not be to the character as such but instead around and for the sake of the character. At the end of the story we must see the character in a new context or fresh light which makes the failure to change obvious. Development does not just mean plot, of course. It could involve shifts of emotion, movement of images or ideas. The important point is that the story finishes in a different place from where it starts and that the reader has been taken along for the ride.

A word of warning about how you approach comments on your work (mine and anyone else's):

- My advice is always to take the problem seriously and the suggested solution lightly. If I have an adverse reaction to something, it is possible that other readers will too. However, I may not have got the diagnosis quite right and, even if I have, there is no reason why the way I would solve a problem is the best way for you to solve it. The main purpose of feedback is always to identify the problems. The solutions are the writer's job
- **Rewriting**
If you are going to solve problems, you are going to rewrite. If I was asked to make one comment about portfolios in general, it would be that, in perhaps a majority of cases, the differences between early and final drafts seemed much more the result of editing than of rewriting. I feel the distinction is crucial. Editing, to me, is mostly a question of language, finding the right word, cutting out the redundant phrase. Although one of the effects of rewriting may be clearer expression, sharper images, more focussed style, the real issues are matters of character, structure, theme - all the things which lie beneath the words, the things which give coherence and depth. Sometimes the changes may be quite small, sometimes extensive but whatever the case they will be making a difference to the whole story not just to the language of a particular moment
- **And finally...**
Remember to number your pages. It makes it hard for judges to give specific references if you don't.