

The Good and Bad of Critiques

By Richard Fay

What I hate - critical insults cloaked in the guise of constructive criticism. And there is plenty of that out there! While critique can help a writer grow, some writers that claim to dish out critiques (or comments resembling critiques) miss the whole concept that personal opinions, tastes, and interpretations of what is "good" and what is "bad" can differ tremendously from person to person, from reader to reader, from "critter" to "critter". They feel that their own individual word is literary law, and that their personal interpretation of this law is written in stone. Clearly, this is not the case.

I've been called a wannabe poet in some circles (clearly less of an example of constructive criticism, and more an example of critical insult - "bad critique", if you will), but a master poet in others. Who is right, and who is wrong? Should I change the way I write poetry because some people feel it isn't worthy, or should I keep doing what works for me, and what works for certain editors and certain publishers (and many of my readers)?

Should a writer listen to what others have to say? Of course, as any artist, a writer should learn to grow and develop the craft of writing. I've certainly grown as a poet after listening to what some editors have said to me in personal rejection letters and revision requests. I have often followed their advice on how to add more depth, substance, and artistry to my work. However, I don't feel a writer should dwell on critiques. At some point in a writer's career, they have to rely just as much on their own judgment and instincts as a writer. They have to realize when the critique being given is good and constructive, and when it is just bad and counter-productive. And sometimes even a critique given with the best of intentions can fall far from the intended mark.

It can be crazy out there, and quite toxic at times. And critique is one of those areas that can all too easily slip into the toxic versus the beneficial.

By the way, some individuals out there refuse to believe they are ever wrong. Telling them their critique is "bad", or even less-than-constructive, can just fan the flames. I know, I've been burned by that conflagration more than once. Like I already said, it can be crazy out there.

Oh, and I think I agree with the idea of "good critique" versus "bad critique" as postulated in this feature. I think it can be a matter of the difference between critiquing the written work and critiquing the writer of that work.

One of the few times I actually responded to a rejection was when one member of an editorial team at a certain horror e-zine made a comment that I could be a good dark poet

if I added more emotional impact to my work. In my mind, that crossed the line between criticism of my submitted work and criticism of my general skill as a poet. I politely suggested to their head editor that they should probably restrict themselves to only commenting on the work at hand, in part because it was a newer market still finding its way, and I was trying to be helpful. I didn't feel it was truly possible to evaluate my overall skill as a dark poet based on only one or two works, especially since other editors at the very same time praised my skills in that very same territory.

Again, you come back to the question of "who is right, and who is wrong?". And even diverging "good critiques" of the same work can be more confusing than they are helpful. In my mind, that is where a writer's own judgment comes in, balancing the varying aspects of the critiques.

I still stand by my belief that, ideally, an editor shouldn't really make a judgment about someone's overall skills as a poet or writer based on one or two pieces, especially if that writer or poet has already penned and sold several works which could be used to better judge that individual's skill and ability in general. It becomes a general criticism of the writer or poet, instead of a specific criticism of the story or poem at hand. That sort of attitude strays too close to those that fling about the terms "wannabe" or "poetaster" for my own personal comfort. And, it could be argued, it certainly smacks of a personal dislike for an individual's overall work, whatever the underlying reasons may truly be.

What was said to me was not that the poem would work better with more emotional impact, but that I would be a better dark poet if I added more emotional impact to my work (or whatever exact terms were used). Frankly, I got the impression that nothing I sent would have been good enough, especially after another editor accepted the very same poem with praise.

I grow especially irritated when such opinions and tastes are presented as literary absolutes, which often happens with these critiques and criticisms. Like I had said in my previous comments, other editors with just as much (if not more) skill and experience in editing and writing saw no problems with my approach to dark poetry (with the same poem even). Obviously, other editors disagreed with this individual's opinion of my skill as a dark poet, which leads me to believe that the suggestion was far from a literary absolute, an unalterable law that all dark poets must follow.

Plus, it may be sacrilege, but I don't feel that editors walk on water. I believe that they CAN be wrong on occasion, that they CAN let their personal preferences shade their views, just like the rest of us. And some may plain dislike your style, while putting an editorial sheen on that dislike to make it look like literary criticism. Does that mean you necessarily have to change your style because of what one editor (or one group of editors) says, especially if that very same style works elsewhere? I honestly don't think so. It brings one back to the idea of judging the value of each critique on a case-by-case basis.

At this point, will I ever have a poem published in the unnamed publication in question? Probably not. Many moons ago, I came to the realization that my style may not work for that market. It happens. Writers and poets have to acknowledge that reality sooner or later. Some places just aren't a good fit, no matter what one does to try to fit in. However, there are other markets, other publications, out there. And some of those may be a much better fit for one's work anyway.

Anyway, do what works for you, and I'll keep doing what works for me. I'll play the game my own way, because that is the only way I know how. And, yes, it is a game, although one with ever-changing rules. I learned that fact pretty soon after taking the plunge into the publication pool.

Then again, perhaps I simply found my literary voice, and confidence in that voice, early on. Others still finding their literary voice, still searching for a style that fits, may approach such comments and critiques differently. Such comments and critiques may prove to be a benefit to those individuals in such situations.

That is not to say that I have stopped listening to critiques and criticisms; I admitted in an earlier reply that I have grown as a poet thanks to comments made in rejection letters and revision requests. However, because I have developed a confidence in my voice and style, I don't feel the need to make wholesale changes to my preferred voice and style based on individual critiques and criticisms. I have no desire to make such changes just to fit in at a certain market, just so I can add another notch to my tally of venues conquered. As a matter of fact, in some instances, I don't think I could change enough to fit in anyway. (I gave up trying at one market, at least for the moment, after receiving fourteen rejections in a row. Clearly, nothing I could possibly send would be a proper fit, so I gave up trying to fit in.)

I may listen, but I don't necessarily act on what I hear. And my response to that one rejection was an isolated instance; I usually just curse quietly to myself and send the piece, revised or not depending on whether or not I feel the piece needs revising, out to the next market.

If you are addressing potential problems with the text, then you are doing your job as an editor or "critter". After all, a writer's work should display a functional grasp of grammar and syntax, and they should show that they have at least some understanding of what works and what doesn't. And sometimes you need to be a bit harsh if a written work contains many glaring flaws.

However, there is a difference between a harsh but honest criticism and an insult, which I think is what was being addressed in this feature. You don't have to insult the writer's

abilities in general when criticizing a particular example of that writer's work. Insults may just stir negative emotions, rather than elicit a positive change.

Of course, the rules can be different for each individual story, and each individual editor. For instance, it is possible, under the right circumstances, to make things like "first-person present tense where the narrator dies" work. I've actually done it a few times in my poetry, with different poems published in different venues. So, even some of the oft-quoted rules can be broken, if they are broken in the right way.

Then again, at another time, I had one of the same editors that accepted one of those works suggest that I change the perspective of another poem in which I had the narrator die at the end. It was a matter of the narrator not really being able to describe how his own bones sunk into the sucking black ooze. It simply stretched the credibility of the piece too far. The editor's suggestion of a change in perspective did make sense to me, so I made the changes, and the revised poem was accepted and published.

Again, it is the matter of judging the value of critiques, criticisms, and comments (even regarding fairly standard rules and literary guidelines) on a case-by-case, poem-by-poem, editor-by-editor basis.