

THE PIXIE AND THE HANDGUN

As an urban fantasy author, I found approaching the first few pages of my book, *Truthsight*, especially challenging. I needed to introduce readers to my characters, and make those characters vivid, empathetic, and compelling. I also needed to orient readers in the plot, so that they could follow the action that was unfolding. On top of that, I also had a lot of world building that needed to be explained pretty quickly in order for readers to follow and get caught up in the events that were about to take place. I needed them to know that my book's main character, Amy, is running a secret clinic for supernatural creatures, that she is in danger and hiding from something, and that she is in constant, secret pain. I wanted to do all this smoothly, without succumbing to the dreaded "info-dump" that would give the readers all the information that they needed, while also encouraging them to put down my book in favor of one that could actually hold their interest. The first draft of the novel started with Amy in a quiet moment. The reader got hints that she had some sort of secret pain that plagued her constantly, and then they were introduced to her home and to the clinic that she had built. Then, slowly, we eased into a scene where Amy was actually treating patients.

The advice I got back from my readers was consistent. "Too slow!" they told me, and I knew they were right. I had been so excited by my character and the unique setting I was constructing that I had allowed myself to start the novel off quietly, hoping to build tension. The truth is that for a first-time author especially, it is so important to grab the reader from the very first sentence by dropping them right into the action. I thought long and hard, and made some major revisions. I decided not to explain the world building or the main character's pain. In short, I decided not to explain anything. Better that the reader be a little confused than bored! As I dived back into the manuscript, red pen in hand, I forced myself to drop the reader into the middle of a tension-filled scene. I came back to my readers with this:

The pixie was very close to shooting me.

I took a deep breath and tried to sound calm.

“If he moves while I’m working, the damage could get much worse,” I explained. “It can be you, or it can be Jason. But we need to do this fast, and someone is going to have to hold the boy down.”

Not much taller than the length of my hand, Grenalda crouched on the exam table in front of her son’s crumpled body. Her chest heaved from the effort it had taken to carry him here in her arms. Blood smeared the colorful bits of woven bird feathers she wore as clothing, and her eyes were wide and panic-stricken. She kept her right hand up, poised over her shoulder, stretching her fingers toward the dart-blower strapped across her back. We were humans, and though she might have no choice but to come to us for help, she made it perfectly clear that she didn’t fully trust us.

“Why can’t you just bandage him up?”

“His head wound is simple—we’ll wrap it and it will heal just fine. But his leg is broken. If we don’t fix it correctly, the bone will heal crooked. He’ll limp for the rest of his life.”

My chest burned and I still wore my scrubs from my shift in the ER. I hadn’t eaten since breakfast, which I vaguely remembered choking down while driving to work at around 5:00 AM. Now dark had nearly fallen, and the chill early evening air streamed in through the thrown open doors of the converted barn that sat on the edge of my property. Usually, I had a break between a shift in the county ER and the arrival of the first patient to my night clinic. But Grenalda’s boy couldn’t wait for treatment. I blinked and tried to focus on the small creature glaring up at me.

“Very well,” she announced, after a long pause. “Dr. Jason may hold him. *Gently*. I will watch.”

She launched herself into the air and came to hover just over my shoulder, her eyes narrow as she watched my every move. Jason had moved with impressive speed, setting out everything I might need on the table. The magnifying equipment I used when working with our tiniest patients was waiting, as well as an assortment of salves and bandages. I ran my fingers down the small boy's body, checking to make sure there weren't any injuries I had missed.

"All set?" I asked Jason.

He lay his hand over the boy's chest, holding the child's arms down and his body still. "Ready when you are, Amy." He nodded, and I set to work.

The most difficult thing would be not using too much force. The boy's bones were so thin that it was hard not to break more while trying to set the leg bone he had already injured. The child's eyes flickered, open and then shut. He made a sharp, high-pitched sound of distress that sounded like the mewl of a kitten.

"What is wrong with him?" Grenalda demanded, her voice breaking even as her eyes flashed and her fingers tightened around her weapon.

"Nothing," I replied, working hard to keep my voice even. "Setting bones is a nasty business. We have clover leaf on hand to give for the pain, if he fully regains consciousness. But if I move quickly, this can all be over by the time he wakes up."

But the boy's cry of pain had pierced my heart, and as I spoke my conscience twisted uncomfortably inside me. *It doesn't have to be this hard. I could heal this boy with a touch. With barely a thought. No need for pain or fear. He could be whole again already.* But I shook my head to dispel the thoughts, and leaned closer to my work. *No, I told myself. Those days are over. If I use my touch to heal*

him, then in two or three days I will be dead. They would find me. And then who would heal him the next time he falls? And Grenalda and her son are not the only ones who need me.

The information that I wanted to convey is all there. By the end of the first two pages, the reader understands that Amy is a human who is providing medical care to a not-entirely-trusting preternatural creature. It hasn't explicitly been said that her clinic is a secret, but it wouldn't be too hard for a reader to deduce that. You get the sense that she is in pain, and that no one else knows that. You can also tell that Amy has abilities that she is not using, because she is afraid that using them might give her presence away to someone or something that wishes to do her harm. I took it back to my beta readers, and all in all they liked it. I got great feedback...except for one thing. Some of my readers took issue with the first sentence I had crafted.

"The pixie was very close to shooting me. I took a deep breath and tried to sound calm."

The problem with the sentence, they said, was that it sounded almost humorous. Pixies are usually portrayed as harmless and cute—the image of one threatening a human was more likely to make people laugh than to make them nervous. One of the goals of my revision had been to create tension—the sentence didn't do that. Also, would people think that the pixie was holding a handgun? The image was unclear, and you didn't find out that she was, in fact, holding a dart blower until the end of the next paragraph. I was told to re-work the first sentence. "Yes, of course," I said when I got the feedback, agreeing completely. And at the time I honestly intended to throw the sentence out and replace it with something darker, more tense, and less ambiguous.

Except I didn't.

I really believe that it is important to listen to the feedback you get from trusted critique partners and beta readers. I know that my writing always improves when I get constructive feedback and take it to heart. But there is a limit to how much we can let other people make decisions about what does or doesn't work for our writing. Ultimately, the author is the one who has a vision of what that book is meant to be, and sometimes we have to stand by that vision, even when others don't see it as clearly as we do.

When it came down to it, I loved that sentence. I liked the undercurrent of humor that it carried. It sounded like Amy's voice in my head—not taking herself, or the situation, too seriously. The truth is that a lot of urban fantasy has that core of humor running through it—urban fantasy novels are often filled with characters who are fully capable of laughing at themselves, or those around them, even when things seem to be at their worst. It didn't bother me if readers were uncertain for a paragraph or two what exactly it was that the pixie was very close to shooting at Amy. If nothing else, that confusion gave them a reason to keep reading.

I kept the first sentence, even though I was nervous about it. I worried that it would turn potential agents and editors off right away. But I simply loved it too much to let it go. I started submitting my manuscript. I was fortunate enough to find a wonderful press that wanted to publish it. When I sent my manuscript off to my new editor, I was both excited to work with her and nervous about what kinds of changes she might ask for. I worried specifically about that first sentence. I told myself that if she told me to change it, I would listen. I wanted to work with this press, and I would just have to be flexible. When I got her notes back, I opened them with a fair amount of trepidation. And there, at the very top, next to my first sentence was this note:

“I love this opening, possibly one of the best opening lines I’ve read!”

It is a wonderful thing to listen to critique and criticism. I am very sure that if I hadn’t gotten advice from friends and done a tremendous amount of re-writing, my book would not now be in print. But it is also wonderful to know when to say “no” to a suggested change, to stick with your own vision, and to write the book that you want to write.



Author Miriam Greystone writes urban fantasy stories filled with magic, romance and the occasional centaur. She fuels her creativity with an insatiable appetite for reading and frequent episodes of Doctor Who. She lives just outside of Washington DC with her husband and children, and when she isn’t hunched over her laptop, she can often be found baking or going on long hikes with her family.