

Blood Conviction

Manuscript critique

Introduction

Congratulations on completing the first draft of your manuscript! *Blood Conviction* is a fast-paced thriller that skillfully balances action with thoughtful introspection, packing a lot of detail and plot into its 250 pages. It slots nicely into the crime thriller category, but with elements of a psychological thriller and family drama. In crossing genres, the book will appeal to a wide range of readers, although perhaps less so to young adults, as the main characters are all older and all struggling with the demons of their pasts.

My overall impression was of a compelling plot and strong characters, but after reaching the end of the book, I was left unclear on certain points. These are discussed in more detail in the sections below. However, the two main areas of concern to keep in mind as you move through this critique are the following:

1. The legal drama involving the Blair family is significantly underdeveloped compared to the rest of the plot. In part, this is because your writing about law and courtroom proceedings lacks the authenticity of your writing about forensics. I have recommended some possible solutions for this problem throughout the critique.
2. The ending comes across as unplanned. While the killer should not be clear until the conclusion, it is crucial that you drop enough hints throughout the novel that the reader can begin to piece together some possibilities and thus feel satisfied at the unexpected reveal. The section on plot proposes solutions for this issue.

Characters

Three characters fit the bill of main character: Marie is a disgraced former forensic scientist, Peter Grey a private investigator and former cop, and Mrs. Blair the mother of a wrongfully convicted killer. All three become real through their dialogue, as each has idiosyncratic speech patterns that readily distinguish them as different people. Mrs. Blair is such an unexpected character: tough, devoted, and not entirely likeable. I'm struck by how these three characters, all older, none glamorous, are such an odd trio. Other characters are all well described and developed consistently throughout the manuscript, and most have a purpose in the overall plot.

The Marie and Peter plotlines intersect nicely, with these two adversaries reluctantly working together not only to catch the killer and free an innocent man but also to expose the widespread corruption that has derailed their careers. For both Marie and Peter, the investigation gets personal, so there is plenty of tension between them. I found the storyline of Mrs. Blair less compelling, however. The character is at her best when interacting with Peter, but her interactions with the lawyers were not as successful. In addition, the family drama introduces dynamics not relevant to the main plot.

In this regard, my editorial recommendations are the following:

- You mentioned that you've considered repositioning Mrs. Blair as a secondary character rather than a primary. I agree that this is the best way to tell her story. The scenes in which she interacts with Peter are informative, compelling, and funny, and she shines in these, but her scenes as an individual character come across as tacked on to justify explanations of the legal plot. As she already has significantly fewer POV chapters than Marie and Peter, revising to better accommodate her as a secondary character should not be problematic.
- Some of the minor characters, such as the second unnamed Blair son and the cousins, should be eliminated or consolidated into one. I recommend that the Blair family be limited to Mrs. Blair and Daniel. For example, the brief appearance of Mr. Blair in Chapter 11 was jarring. Readers will assume he is either dead or not in the picture, so if you wish to include him, he needs to be introduced earlier. However, this scene does little to advance the plot, so you might eliminate it.
- In narrative, try to identify characters by a consistent name. For example, Mrs. Blair is occasionally referred to in narrative as Miriam. Reserve this for dialogue, where the names characters use to address each other can reveal much about their relationships. The fact that the priest addresses Mrs. Blair as Miriam shows the reader that they are friends without you having to explicitly say so. However, the name Miriam is too similar to Marie, so you might consider renaming her. A good rule of thumb is to avoid names with the same first letter.
- You introduce Stella Martin as the young colleague of Peter, but she disappears during the second half of the novel. Her interjections as the "straight man" to Peter are funny

and valuable in dialogue, but I would recommend that you either maintain her presence throughout the book or remove her entirely.

- A minor concern is the character Fred Hughes, who appears briefly in the courthouse scene on p. 221. Is Fred Hughes the same person as Detective Hughes? We know Detective Hughes left the police force several years ago, so it's odd that he would reappear in this later scene. If Fred Hughes is a different character, I would simply give him a different surname.

Plot

The plot is exceptionally original, especially the arc involving Marie and the forensics laboratory. The intersection of Marie and Peter's subplots as they search for the true killer and uncover the corruption that led to the wrong man being convicted is well done, and the story moves along well, with excellent transitions between the high points and the low points. However, after reviewing the book twice, I remain unclear on a few plot elements. You're familiar with the material, so the reasoning is probably clear in your mind, but remember not to be too subtle. Readers sometimes need to have things spelled out for them.

- First, why did the laboratory mistake have such severe consequences? A more expected outcome is that Marie's mistake would lead to a mistrial and the accused walking free, but instead it led to Daniel Blair's conviction. Additionally, why was Marie forced into early retirement? Readers would instead expect disciplinary action or mandatory retraining. We know by the end of the book that the police department and forensics lab are rife with corruption, so if the intention is to imply that the higher-ups were looking for a way to get rid of her, consider hinting at this more strongly, perhaps by having Marie consider the possibility herself.
- Second, what is the root of the animosity between Marie and Peter? There's some indication that they knew and disliked each other in the past, when she worked in the lab and he was a police officer, but why is that? Was Marie difficult to work with? Did Peter subvert protocol? Did Marie wrong him somehow, or vice versa? Was it just a personality clash? All we see is their contempt for each other, but the root is not clear. This is something you need to spell out for the reader. There are also hints of sympathy and common ground between Marie and Peter, as both were forced into early retirement. This dynamic and backstory should be more fully developed.

- Third, I finished the book with a lot of unanswered questions about the real killer. The majority of the book focuses on proving that Daniel Blair was wrongfully convicted, so the shift in Chapter 14 to the pursuit of the real killer feels abrupt. As mentioned in the introduction, while the ending of the book was unexpected, with McKay already behind bars, introducing the real killer so late in the story is not effective. Considering McKay bears an old grudge against Peter, there are opportunities to introduce him as early as Chapter 4, when Peter meets with the factory manager. Introducing McKay along with the other potential subjects allows you to weave the threads that lead to the ending more naturally.

Point of view

The story is written from a limited omniscient point of view, meaning we get to see inside only a few characters' heads. This strategy works, but be careful of "head hopping." By this I mean instances where characters seem to know what others are thinking. The shifts in point of view are generally limited to different chapters, but in Chapter 16, the point of view rapidly jumps from Peter, to Mrs. Blair, to Daniel Blair, and the effect is very disorienting. Was this chapter perhaps pieced together from several chapters? To remedy the choppiness, I suggest rewriting this chapter from the point of view of either Peter or, if you decide to maintain her in her current role as a main character, Mrs. Blair.

Timeline and pacing

The pacing of the manuscript was generally excellent, with the exception of the legal plotline involving Mrs. Blair. If you decide to go ahead with repositioning her character, this problem will resolve itself naturally. One other minor pacing concern revolves around the forensics discussions beginning on p. 43 with the line "Her coworkers had gone home for the night." The research behind the forensics plot with Marie is outstanding, no doubt because of your background as a lab technician, and these details really bring the story to life. The information primarily comes through Marie's dialogue. However, the narrative passage on p. 43 is too didactic, and this description of the blood test reads almost like an instruction manual. Try working this information into dialogue, as you've done elsewhere. For example, she could explain the procedure to Peter in the office scene on p. 55, where their verbal sparring would keep the explanation from becoming too dry.

Below are more specific points to consider regarding the timeline and pacing:

- The passage of time is occasionally unclear, as all events seem to happen on a Monday or a Friday. For example, on Monday, Mrs. Blair says she has to meet with the lawyer on Friday (p. 124), but then on Friday, she says, “My meeting with the lawyer yesterday was a waste of time” (p. 129). I strongly recommend creating a timeline for yourself to keep track of when events happen, and try to space them out in the week to avoid unexplained gaps.
- How old is Marie? On p. 67, she says she’s in her mid-sixties, but if she left the forensics lab six years earlier and was in her mid-fifties at the time, this does not add up.
- You were concerned that some of the chapters are too long. I agree in two cases: Chapter 7 can be split into two chapters, with the second beginning with the scene at the factory, and the final five pages of Chapter 13 would work better as part of Chapter 14.

Title

I really like the title *Blood Conviction*. It captures both the psychological and the criminal themes of the story. Daniel Blair was wrongly convicted because of a blood sample, and “conviction” also plays on the word in the sense of “a strong persuasion or belief.” While the three main characters all have strong convictions, Marie has been made to doubt hers, as her superiors at work convinced her she was losing her mental prowess. As we learn at the end of the book, Peter has also been made to doubt himself.

Dialogue

You write wonderful dialogue that really brings the characters to life. The characters reveal themselves through their own words, although you occasionally fall into the habit of paraphrasing and telling readers what they already know from the dialogue—that Mrs. Blair is angry, that Marie feels guilty, and so on. Below are some specific recommendations to keep in mind as you revise your manuscript:

- Add more contractions such as “it’s,” “I’m,” and “you’ve” to help make characters’ speech sound more natural.
- You can frequently cut speech tags such as “he said” and “she said” from dialogue. In a fast-moving two-character scene, sparing speech tags help create the effect of dialogue quickly firing back and forth. Because your characters are readily distinguished by their distinct voices, the reader doesn’t need every line tagged to keep track of who is speaking.

- Beware of having the characters address one another by name too much, particularly Peter and Mrs. Blair. See p. 153, for example. People don't really talk that way, and this passage reads better if you cut three or four instances of the characters addressing one another.

One final note: As mentioned above, be careful of explaining to the reader what a character is saying and how she's saying it. For example, in the following passage, Marie's words are clearly dismissive, so there's no need to say so in the narrative.

Original: "Oh, never mind," Marie said, dismissing the subject. "If you don't believe me, that's your problem."

Suggestion: "Oh, never mind," Marie said. "If you don't believe me, that's your problem."

Formatting

Consider formatting the document in standard manuscript style, as using a simple, consistent presentation will allow editors and reviewers to focus on the content of your book.

- Paragraphs should be aligned ragged right, indented, and double spaced.
- Font should be 12-point Times New Roman.
- Remove any highlighting, colored text, and old comments.
- Add a page break between chapters, and format the chapter headings consistently.

At present, scene breaks are denoted by extra line breaks and sometimes by a row of dots. For the sake of consistency, it's conventional to use three centered asterisks (***) to signify a scene break. The final appearance and layout will be determined during the design phase, and you can decide then if you want to use extra white space or a decorative mark for scene breaks.

Closing remarks

So much of editing is subjective and based on opinion and style, but as the author, you have final say. It's your book! At this stage, the aim isn't to achieve perfection but to ensure the book will catch the attention of reviewers and keep them reading. *Blood Conviction* is already well on its way to getting the consideration it deserves.

Congratulations on an intriguing and well-developed book, and I wish you well in your revisions. I hope you find the above suggestions helpful.

Best of luck!

Jennifer