

Insights from a Writing Contest Judge

By Robin Widmar

If you've ever entered a writing contest, you know the emotional ride that can accompany the process. You've woven a fabulous story with words, heart, and soul. You passed it around your critique group, edited and re-edited, polished the manuscript until it gleams and your brain has rotted into a clump of mush. After going over the contest submission checklist one last time, you click the "Send" button, confident that your literary prowess will soon be recognized and rewarded.

Time passes. The contest scores arrive. Moments later, you are either grinning like a Cheshire cat over sky-high scores, or your writing dreams lie crumpled at the bottom of a wastebasket stuffed with coffee grounds and used tissues. In the case of the latter, you may also believe that writing contest judges are nasty ogres who live to crush the hopes and dreams of aspiring writers everywhere.

My friend, I feel your anguish. I've ridden that horse from the highs of "Fantastic story!" to the lows of "Writer probably shouldn't give up the day job. Ever."

For the same manuscript.

But contrary to what writers may want to believe, the writers, editors and agents who judge writing contests are not monsters of any sort. They may be a little grumpy before they've had their first shot of caffeine (aren't we all?), but they are, in fact, quite human. And they really, really want to see writers succeed.

I've had the privilege of being a contest judge for the annual Pikes Peak Writers Fiction Contest. Having been on the contestant side of things, and still bearing the bruises of size 12 footprints on my ego, I was hesitant at first to join the judges' pool. I didn't want to be responsible for crushing anyone's hopes, inadvertently or otherwise. Eventually I mustered the courage to plunge in, and I'm glad I did. The experience has been interesting and enlightening. Here is some of what I've learned:

1. Judging and critiquing someone else's writing is *hard*. It's not enough to simply say, "I liked this story" or "It didn't work for me." A judge must be able to explain *why* something worked or didn't work, and do so in a constructive manner. This requires knowledge of story craft as well as tact and diplomacy. One careless criticism, one poorly-chosen turn of phrase in a critique, and a novice writer might give up on *The Dream*. Or he might become one of those super-villains you see in the movies, and all of humankind will suffer his wrath. It really could go either way.
2. There are some awesome stories under construction out there! The best works are the easiest to score, but are often the most difficult to critique. How much can you say about something that is quite likely only a submission or three away from publication?
3. Along with the good is the not-quite-so-good: stories that may be encircled by orange traffic cones and concrete barricades for a while longer. Evaluating such a story is like holding a fragile

egg. With proper care, both egg and story can evolve into something marvelous. Mishandle either one, and you'll have a scrambled yolk--or a fledgling super-villain on your hands (see Number 1 above). The best part of critiquing these stories, however, is being able to offer encouragement and advice to up-and-coming writers. Many writers have shared their wisdom with me, so I try to pay it forward by providing positive and constructive critiques. Which brings me to...

4. No matter how helpful you try to be, or how tactful your critique, someone will always take exception. Let's face it: Some writers' egos are so intertwined with their story that they cannot--*will not*--accept that their manuscript still needs work. Thankfully, they are in the minority. Most writers appreciate honest feedback, listen to advice, use what works for them, and file the rest for future reference. These folks are already succeeding in their craft and will one day reap the reward of being published.

5. A judge must be aware of his/her own mental state when reading contest entries. All of us are susceptible to fits and snits when our day isn't going well, and it's easy to let frustrations creep into judging comments. When I encounter an entry that makes me want to buy stock in red ink, I step back and ask myself: Was the story that bad? Or was I having a mood? Either way, I set the story aside and come back to it later, after the snit has passed, to make sure I am providing a fair evaluation of the work.

6. Judging, like the decisions made by agents and editors, is subjective. One person may think a story is simply fabulous; another may see it quite differently. Everyone who reads your work has different tastes. Your story may well be The Next NYT Best Seller, but some readers will like it and some will not. That's just the way it is. I can still recall a fantastic story I judged, and the disappointment I felt when it didn't place in the top three of its category. Just because the story didn't place doesn't mean it shouldn't have. Scores can be very close, and placing may hinge on a single point difference.

Writing contests are a great way to get objective feedback about your work. The comments and critiques you receive are intended to help you learn and grow as a writer. Remember, judges aren't ogres. Keep writing, keep honing your skills, and never give up.

And don't become a super-villain. The path to world domination is overrated.

Originally appeared in The Pikes Peak Writer, Volume IX, Issue 5, September 2010.