

Read & Critique “X”with Sandra Bond

By Debbie Maxwell Allen

Twenty-five writers sat tensed in their chairs, palms sweating, throats clearing. Clutched in each pair of hands: a single page. Each sheet contained just 16 lines, but those lines held power over each writer’s future.

As the agent stepped into the room, 25 sets of eyes followed her and shone with questions. “Will she like it? Maybe a little?” “Will all these people snicker at the words I’ve poured from inside me?” A few sly glances gauged the distance to the exit, should the worst happen.

The agent, Sandra Bond, cleared her throat (did she rub her palms on her slacks?) and surprised us all. “I’m much more nervous than all of you,” she said. It hadn’t dawned on us that she was in the hot seat, having only five minutes to listen to and pass judgment on another’s writing.

Whether or not that made us feel better, it did remind us that agents are human. They don’t like rejection any more than the rest of us. Sandra’s vulnerability eased some of the tension in the room.

As the writers stood and read from their pages, Sandra gave excellent, specific constructive criticisms, which added up to the equivalent of a wonderful seminar on how to hook a reader. Here are some highlights:

The first sentence is paramount. Start with a graphic, visual scene—action, tension, dark humor. Don’t confuse your reader with the first line, hoping they’ll keep reading to figure it out. They’re more likely to put it down. If your first line or paragraph doesn’t grab the friends you test it out on, try ditching it and begin with your second paragraph. Sandra says this won’t always work, but it’s worth a try.

Show your character’s personality immediately. Whether it’s through humor and sarcasm, or fear and paranoia, let your reader see your character’s quirks and sensitivities. What are the “must haves” or “can’t stands” in their world?

Beware the prologue. While many successful authors use them, Sandra warns that writers must be aware that lots of readers skip them. If your prologue reveals something crucial to the story, weave the information into your novel, or turn the prologue into chapter one.

Use the senses to pull in the reader. Two submissions that seemed to be popular with Sandra, and the group as a whole, employed this idea. One focused on several unusual smells that helped connect us to what the main character liked and didn’t like. Another used sound—a particular sound brings back snatches of memories from the lead character’s life—and makes us want to know what sound stirred up these recollections.

If you’re tackling a memoir... Sandra noted that memoirs are a difficult genre to get into. In order to distinguish yours, accentuate your voice to make it compelling and unique. She told us that a memoir should never begin with, “When I was nine...” Find the voice that will grab your reader.

Attending a Read & Critique session helped me realize that I could not only survive reading aloud in a group, but pick up some great writing tips as well. If you want to learn more, be brave and sign up for a Read & Critique next year!

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