

Project: Speculative Fiction Novel

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***The Binding* [REDACTED] - Manuscript Assessment**

Summary

The Binding [REDACTED] is an emotionally compelling, intellectually rich coming of age story with flawed, relatable characters, an alluring mystery, and dialogue that digs into the reader's mind, begging for further examination. The greatest strengths of this manuscript are character authenticity, dialogue-driven relational conflict, ideas and concepts that inspire curiosity and wonder, and the gradual teasing out of information related to the story's mysteries. The areas that need the most work are improving the clarity of the characters' intellectual discussions and trimming the overall length of the novel. For next edits, I recommend reducing the manuscript from 300K to 200K words. Condensing the content will, in itself, improve clarity since you'll have to emphasize what is most vital and make sure each exchange says more with less.

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Characters

E [REDACTED] – I was rooting for E [REDACTED] from the very first chapter, which is exactly what a first chapter needs to accomplish. He has clear likes and dislikes that are relatable to the reader (I hate school, I want people to tell me I'm special, why do I have to follow directions?). You do an excellent job of characterizing him as a 13-year-old boy with exceptionally normal attitude issues. He has a realistic mix of strengths and weaknesses that endear him to readers. He's sullen and hates homework but is super sweet and responsible with his little sisters. E [REDACTED] feels angry at and betrayed by his mom, but he loves his parents dearly and believes they can take on the world (or a Marine Colonel). He's a clueless jerk to girls but composes terribly adorable poetry in his mind about brown eyes. His internal math book feels like a superpower, and it was so satisfying seeing him "level up" mentally and "unlock" more of the world around him over the course of the weekend. As a reader, I bought into him as a person and am eager to read more of his story.

B [REDACTED] – I agree with E [REDACTED]'s assessment - adorable. Her bubbly demeanor, nonstop need to talk, and obsessive interest in specific topics will make modern readers guess she's ADHD. Or neurodivergent in some way. Even if she wouldn't receive that diagnosis because of her unique

condition, you've done an effective job of demonstrating that more is different about B's brain than her intelligence.

However, the prologue is confusing. It answers the question, "how does B think?" but that's not the most important question to answer for readers who have just picked up your book. The first 5 pages are the vital window of opportunity in which authors hook or lose a reader. So, the most important question to answer is, "why should I care?" Authors make readers care about a character by giving them strong motivations, wants, or needs, and then throwing problems at them that prevent them from achieving their goal. But in this opening scene, B's motivations are unclear. It wasn't until my second readthrough that I realized she was sitting in front of the church waiting for a chance to go in and eat cookies. I thought her opening line about cookies only being available at certain times was just one among many random thoughts running through her head.

This scene would be much more compelling if readers see B taking some form of action and then achieving a small-scale solution. The quest for food is as old as time. Point A to point B is an effective and simple scene framework. What if you show B digging through dumpsters on the way to the church, thinking about her books as she goes? Then when she arrives, after waiting, let readers see the conclusion where an old church lady takes her hand and brings her into the church. From the dumpster, unto a shelter flowing with milk and cookies. That is an incredibly powerful image, one which compels a reader to keep reading. Then, it will matter less if we don't understand most of what's going through B's head. The *story* (want, problem, action, solution) will be unmistakably clear. And we will understand 3 elements that underpin her character for the rest of the story: her basic needs aren't being met, she is hyperintelligent with a vastly different thought process than most children, and the church steps in to meet her needs.

E&B – Yes, I ship them! I loved seeing how E&B's relationship developed over the course of the story and how much E steps up to treat B better and try to understand her. Showing us as much as you did about B's past helps us connect with her as much as with E. As a reader, I wondered if everything would be about E or if, because B clearly doesn't like talking about her past, she would only give him vague information rather than specifics. But she bares her guts to him, and it opens his eyes, enabling readers to get on board with the rapid progression of their relationship. Their "almost palm to palm" ritual was adorable and makes for an excellent recurring image.

J – E's relationship with his mother is one of the most compelling parts of this story. You do an excellent job teasing out more and more complexity as Friday and Saturday progress. Their history almost functions as a mystery, with E trying to understand his mother's motivations, the start of his parents' relationship, and what he was like as a young child. The mix of shame, jealousy, confrontation, joy, pride, and spiritual darkness, results in a rewarding roller coaster of emotions.

But after E tells J to apply and go to college with him, this arc dropped out of the picture a bit too much. She suddenly seemed a little too fine with everything. It makes sense that the story has an overlapping arc of sorts, with the relationship with his mother taking precedence in the first

half of the story, and his relationship with B ■ dominating in the second half. And people do keep reminding E ■ that he can't just assume everything is resolved. In a way, their relationship has to feel unfinished. He hasn't gotten to the "third trial" yet, which is whether he'll actually let his mother teach him history. Everyone quietly agrees to defer judgment until mother and son can start the new form of their relationship. But it felt somewhat out of character how comfortable his mother suddenly seemed in the final trial.

Side Characters

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Other side characters – Sar ■, Col. M ■, Dr. C ■, and Car ■ all have their "moment." It is delightful to read a story with so many secondary characters that clearly have their own rich pasts, motivations, and unique quirks. Col. M ■ makes for a delightfully amusing antagonist who serves as a concrete face for the threat of being rejected by the school. Dr. C ■ is the type of character readers likely expected to see at a place like this, but the lego scene sure was unique! Sar ■ and Car ■ grew on me throughout the story as E ■ interacted with them more. I like the hints at how much they were doing behind the scenes. It gives the whole university more layers that readers can look forward to peeling back in later books.

Plot

Character test

Of course, the real plot is a character test! Can they prove to the University that they are worthy of admission, not just based on merit, but on the quality of their character? It was exciting seeing how both E ■ and B ■ grew over the course of the weekend intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, and relationally.

Some readers may question how realistic E ■'s drastic maturation is, but I think you maintain realism effectively through a variety of tactics. First, you emphasize how much E ■ is pushing back against humility and how much it takes to get him to ask for help even once. It's not just an on-off switch for him – he really does resist the change people are demanding of him. Second, fear is a powerful motivator, and the dread of returning to his mind-numbing high school, rather than starting college at 13, compels him incredibly. Third, you clearly describe his different mental capacity, including his "subroutines" and how information is as necessary to him as oxygen. His huge intuitive leaps don't feel like "magic" so much as finally taking the training wheels off and being allowed to breathe fully for the first time. Fourth, actions speak louder than words and he has shown himself to generally be a kind, thoughtful, obedient kid who cares deeply about his family and is an earnest worker.

So, the outcome didn't feel like a drastic character change so much as clearing the air with open communication, being able to confront how miserable he is with his current school, and suddenly having hope for his future. Constant fear and misery can make even the most empathetic child act

out. I found it incredibly rewarding to see E [REDACTED] work through so many layers of himself, his family, and the larger intellectual world - the ending felt well earned.

The Tower

The Tower is a compelling mystery – why do so many members of the University (and its partner company’s inner circle) die young? What is this strange “Tower” that some, but not all, of the geniuses are invited to? The way the characters gradually discuss more rumors over the course of the story is an effective way to build mystery and intrigue, while keeping focus on their relationship. It’s possible that readers would be frustrated with E [REDACTED]’s disinterest in hunting down more info. It might be a distraction hanging over the reader – “why are they reading *Bridge to Terabithia* and doing math problems when they could be trying to figure out why they might die while doing research here?”

But on the other hand, the mystery is clearly not the focus of the story. I don’t think readers will be disappointed at the end that they don’t learn the secret, because you make no promise that B [REDACTED] and E [REDACTED] will. There are many ways that you do the opposite, enforcing the realism of the story (Sar [REDACTED]’ use of a ballistic shield), and thereby signaling to readers that the two teenagers aren’t going to be shown into the government-classified secret sanctum by the end of book 1. I think B [REDACTED]’s hypothesis about an unknown technology that results in enhanced intellectual performance will be enough to satisfy readers, while preserving the promise of a greater reveal for future books.

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Intellectual Discussions

Length

Right now, the intellectual discussions are quite verbose. In drafts, it’s often necessary for authors to get down everything we’re thinking about a certain topic, or the ideas left unsaid will drive us crazy. This makes even more sense when the characters themselves have a compulsive need to investigate and analyze everything. But it’s necessary to strike a balance between characterizing neurodivergent individuals accurately and writing scenes that don’t bog down readers too much. Just because it’s realistic that a character keeps talking nonstop, doesn’t mean that it is the most effective way to write several scenes back-to-back. Right now, many of B [REDACTED] and E [REDACTED]’s conversations read like you wrote down *everything* they likely thought on the topic.

Now comes the hard part of trimming down to only what is absolutely needed to drive each scene forward. I know you’re a believer of “less is more.” Right now, many of B [REDACTED]’s arguments and E [REDACTED]’s revelations would be more impactful if there were not so many crammed together at once. The discussions about individual books, the Bible, and the liberal arts need to be trimmed. For each exchange, I encourage you to ask, “does this *part* of this discussion affect the outcome of this story and character’s arc?” If not - if you could remove it and the emotional and spiritual impact of the story remain the same - do so. Of course, part of the point of Second Trial was to overwhelm them

with a flood of challenges. Effective writing will make your readers empathize with how overwhelmed E is, while not feeling drowned themselves. You don't want your readers to put down your book because there's no space between what they and the characters are feeling.

If I was going to edit some of these passages, as a trend, I would condense repeat discussions into half their current length. Topics that came up repeatedly such as the value of liberal arts, Terabithia, and "why won't E ask for help?" became less impactful the more the topic was repeated. I'd leave the first conversation on each of those topics mostly as they are now, but cut about half the content in successive discussions to eliminate repetition, let the reader fill in some of the blanks (let us have those click moments too!), and allow the new arguments and revelations to have more of a spotlight, rather than getting lost in the "review." I would condense the scene in the church basement by half, and trim B's first letter to him significantly as well. Right now, the letter is shown as a "click" moment for E in accepting the humanities, but it was so long that her points began to blur together.

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Connect content with settings

I also encourage you to try to intersperse more interesting settings and actions into these intellectual scenes. Writing professors call this "avoiding talking heads." While dialogue is the heart of your story, and I think *should* be the heart of most stories, it's still important to add dynamism to scenes to prevent them from reading more like a Socratic dialogue. One of my writing professors was also a theater professor and liked to say that you should be able to "turn down the sound" on a scene and still have a general understanding of what was happening. The ubiquitous "café conversation" in movies often doesn't differ regardless of whether you're watching a romantic comedy or an action movie. So, a better creative choice would be to set a conversation in a different location, with more movement, to create an unspoken layer of meaning as the backdrop for the words.

E gets to tour the STEM side of campus, physically putting his hands on many things as he converses with the students and professors there. Likewise, when he and B tour town and touch the obelisk, their specific words stand out in my mind because they are grounded in the actions they take in a specific location. Same with the lego scene, and E's fight with his mother in their hotel room. The study sessions in the library blur together because E and B don't have much on their "stage" to interact with.

But there is huge potential for the Lead side of campus! What if they have some of their discussions in an art gallery or studio, a music room or auditorium, or a garden with a creek (Terabithia)? B knows how much E likes working with his hands! In scenes where they're just trying to read large chunks of text at once, it makes sense they'd be in the library. But you can skim over some of that with exposition and have them start moving once they strike up a discussion. When they're having conversations like "can your math beget beauty?" how powerful would it be for her to turn and point at a painting depicting Lancelot and wait for him to argue that it uses the Golden Ratio (he

probably wouldn't know enough to argue that – which would be her point – you have to study the humanities to have a chance to argue that math underpins the arts).

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Target Audience

You've written the story you want to tell, which is the best place for an author to start! But now, it is important to refine your audience and ask who you're writing for. Christian readers or general readers receptive to religious content? After all, neither of your main characters are Christian – they just reference the Bible as part of their education.

Are you writing for average readers who want to be wowed by geniuses, or people with above average intelligence and education who want more of an intellectual challenge? Orson Scott Card tells his story from the perspective of a child genius who mastered geometry at age 6, but somehow readers don't feel excluded, ashamed, or intimidated – rather, readers feel invited to share in Ender's revelations and feel vicariously empowered by his victories.

I think everyone likes to imagine they're in the 1% in at least one area. More quirky, more clumsy, more misunderstood, more of a daydreamer, etc. Everyone feels like there's a way in which they're singled out, don't fit in, or are different from others, and even if these differences are much more mundane than genius intelligence, our culture teaches that they make us "special." I think that's why *Ender's Game* works so well. The author achieved a masterful balance between giving readers a novel glimpse into someone "cooler" than us, while also making us feel like his story of persecuted loneliness was actually about us.

I suggest you target the following type of readers:

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Marketability

There is a market for *The Binding* [REDACTED] – a base of readers who would absolutely be glad to read it! That is what publishers consider when choosing whether to accept a manuscript: "will our readers buy this?" These are some of the most marketable elements of your story, and ones you should mention frequently when pitching your story:

- At its heart, this is a story about belonging, friendship, family, and self-identity. These are universally compelling themes that will resonate with most readers.
- On top of that, stories set at schools, particularly schools with a special twist to them, are extremely popular.
- You have one male and one female main character, which most publishers seek. Male and female readers alike will enjoy the story.
- The authentic diversity of your cast

- Readers love books that celebrate the love of reading. It's kind of a no-brainer. How do you make your reader happy? By talking about how awesome books are.
- The pacing of your story will also resonate with modern readers. It's in real time, with high-stakes tension. Some of the discussions bog down the pacing, but with editing, I think readers will say, "I couldn't put it down." I didn't want to put it down, even in the denser areas!
- Your story can appeal to adult and young adult audiences alike, though I would list it as adult fiction because of its length.

A pitch like this could be effective:

"What if Ender Wiggin had a counterpart – at an alternate academy for super-geniuses – whose job was to *invent* the weapons that would turn the tide of war?

My story takes place at a mysterious research university in the Colorado mountains, not long after the end of the Cold War. A boy and a girl. 2 polymaths. 1 Tower. ???% probability of early death. Will they pass the trial for admission?

A cerebral, character-driven story with spiritual and speculative elements, perfect for fans of C.S. Lewis and ____."

You would fill in the blank with what the industry calls a "comparative title" or "comp" for short – a book with similar style and themes as your own. Again, you're answering the publisher's question: "who will buy this book?" Your answer: people who read both C.S. Lewis and Orson Scott Card. But at least one comp is expected to be a book released within the past few years. So, I suggest doing some research to find more recent titles that feature young geniuses, secret schools, inventors, or speculative-military elements.

I suggest marketing this not as science fiction, but as speculative fiction. This story is set in the past, not the future, and the only impossible element, the Ring, does not become openly relevant until later books. Speculative fiction was introduced as a genre tag for exactly this kind of story – character-driven works of literary quality with one small element that falls outside of reality. A lot of fiction uses a school as the setting, so while I struggle to think of a one-word subgenre "tag" for this book, I think the phrase "academy for geniuses" is clear enough for publishers to get an idea of what type of reader your story would interest.

The biggest issue publishers would have with the manuscript is its length. I know this hurts, but the content needs to be trimmed down by a third to a half. The average length of most sci-fi novels is 90,000-150,000 words (fantasy can be significantly longer). Most publishers shy away from publishing a debut novel of over 130,000 words (they would still consider you a debut author since M████ was self-published). This is especially the case if you want to market to young adult audiences in addition to adults. YA sci-fi books average closer to 70,000-100,000 words (*Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, and *The Mazerunner* all fall at 100K). I've heard agents say that they won't even look at submissions over 200,000 words unless they know the author.

Unfortunately, [REDACTED] Publishing, the current frontrunner of Christian speculative fiction, specifies on their website that they do not accept manuscripts longer than 140,000 words. Some indie presses are more flexible, so you could certainly look further afield. Because of the low speculative elements, I think you could also query conservative-friendly or Christian publishers who specialize in more serious military, historical, and literary fiction.

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Conclusion

The Binding [REDACTED] is a delightfully original story that makes readers think and feel long after finishing the last page. I dreamed about these characters. Lines from their conversations have stuck out in my mind since I read them, and I keep going over them again and again. Your story has sparked many ideas in me and I want to know what happens to these characters next! That's the sign of an effective book. Discussions can be trimmed, and a target readership can be clarified, but if a story doesn't have heart, no amount of editing can save it. Your story caught me from the first chapter and pulled at my heart all the way through. I am confident that by condensing the length of this book, these vivacious characters will have an even greater intellectual, emotional, and spiritual impact on your readers. I am also optimistic that Christian speculative fiction publishing has grown enough as an industry that your book has a chance of being picked up for publication.

As always, happy writing!

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