

# Developmental Edit Letter for *What the River Knew* by Cindy Brown

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Cameron Grow  
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Thank you so much for allowing me to read your manuscript of *What The River Knew*. Despite being a fan of mystery television I hadn't really read much of it in years, but your book might have just been my gateway into the genre. I loved watching Ster McCaffrey hunt for clues on the streets of Portland like a Pacific Northwest Columbo, trying to find a small child's mother while also dealing with a brain injury was compelling stuff. The way in which Ster has his previous notions and assumptions challenged in an organic and compelling way. Even though I was pretty ahead of Ster most of the time regarding the case, I didn't care because watching him pull out his notebook and puzzle through the information he had and learning how to talk to new people was where the real interest was.

The rest of the cast was fantastic as well, Spidey despite his condition brought an unexpected wholesomeness and he worked well as a kind of sidekick for Ster while also being one of the book's greatest heroes. Jay the taxi driver's lack of screen presence didn't stop him from quickly becoming one of my favorite characters just in how willing he was to go above and beyond the call of duty. Even Will who I didn't like at first started to grow on me, especially when I read this line; "[Will] couldn't imagine meeting with an entire group of strangers, even if they did like science or board games like he did," (294) I don't know if the autism coding was intentional but once I started reading Will with that lens he quickly became someone I was rooting for, while some might be annoyed at his naivete, I'm glad he made the right decision in the end.

I would say the one character I liked the least, that I wasn't supposed to dislike, was Bonnie. She has a very tragic and sympathetic backstory, but the amount of lies she tells really started to annoy me. I understand why she didn't always tell Ster the truth. I would probably do the same in her position and with the information given at the

time. By the end of the book, I know that she is one of the good guys and does want the best for Ster and Fuzzy but the fact that she's still lying to Ster's face about Lydia's death irks me the wrong way. Especially since, by Lydia's own admission on page 416, she really should have picked a better story. It doesn't sit well with me that in protecting Lydia, Bonnie feels the need to hurt Ster with knowledge that his daughter overdosed while being so close to home.

## **ORGANIZATION**

### ***Bonnie doesn't Sleepwalk?*** - Ch. 93, pg. 369-372, 389-391

Bonnie is also the source of a subplot that I feel can be cut from the final draft. Chapter 93 feels very superfluous. While Rich hasn't officially been revealed as the bad guy, I think the reader has enough evidence at this point to know it's not Bonnie. More importantly, while this chapter might imply that Bonnie isn't as innocent as she claims, it doesn't establish any reason for her to kill her husband, much less Jane. There's no money involved, Bonnie could have easily kidnapped Fuzzy when she was taking care of Ster, so if she's supposed to be one last red herring before the end I'm simply not buying it.

Even that last text message from Harper telling Ster to not trust Bonnie, feels unnecessary. Ster doesn't really get a chance to distrust Bonnie, he doesn't see her until she shows up with Harper at the Greyhound station at which point the misunderstanding is cleared up. Bonnie says "We don't have time for this! I don't sleep walk anymore," (390) and everyone agrees, they don't have time for this last minute suspicion, and the plot moves forward. I say listen to your characters here and skip this. Other than getting Harper and Bonnie together so they can race to the conclusion, I don't think Chapter 93 is really earning its keep. It's got a good cliffhanger, but trust me you've got plenty of those throughout the book.

### ***Meditation Retreat*** - pg. 341

I'm also going to add Harper's Meditation retreat (341) to the list of sections that can be cut. For me it comes out of nowhere and feels like a forced reason to write Harper out of this section when Ster needs her. I was half-expecting it to be revealed that this retreat was a lie and that Harper was on a secret mission of somesort. Maybe

she could have been helping Bonnie fake Lydia's death or talking to people who knew Jane and had to just keep her phone on silent for some reason. I like Harper as a character and as a kind of rookie sleuth that Ster can bounce ideas off of but this sudden unexplained disappearance made me like her slightly less.

***Lydia Lives*** - Ch. 105, pg. 416-417

The reveal that Lydia faked her death is a part that I would consider cutting, though I'm honestly of two minds on it. On one hand, I like the idea of one last mystery for the reader, one that they might be able to solve with the evidence you've given them, even if it is pretty shaky. We know that despite his hallucinations Spidey's actually pretty observant and his visions are usually of nightmares not angels, so him seeing Lydia is kind of unusual. If you go back and make clear that Bonnie is the one who confirmed Lydia's death and we know Bonnie can "keep a secret," (416) then it's possible she could be giving one final lie. Finally would Pete know Lydia? He'd probably contact Ster right away if he saw Lydia's body come through the morgue. I hope this makes it clear that you can cut the scene but still keep Lydia alive.

The other side of me really just wants to see Ster and Lydia reunited. When Ster suspected that Fuzzy might be his grandson, that's when I really became invested in the story. Even when this turned out not to be true I still clung to the hope that Lydia was waiting for Ster at the end of this book and was overjoyed that she was, just not in the way I hoped. I would not change her supposed death at all, as it's vital for Ster's arc and what sets him apart from people like Rich. He's not doing this to protect himself and so that his daughter will like him again, he's doing it because it's the right thing to do. Yet, I still fantasize about Lydia miraculously showing up during the climax and helping Spidey beat up Rich with golf clubs. The final scene (page 417) of her turning away from the warm happy church is heartbreaking and probably has some deeper meaning behind it, but I still want to reach through the text and push her into a warm group hug with Ster, Bonnie, Reb, Fuzzy, and everyone else. As it is, this final page gives me hope that this dream of mine will come true someday, so I'd hate to lose it, but if it makes a stronger book then my tears are worth it.

***Rich and Other Suspect Scenes*** - Ch. 6, pg. 24-30, Ch. 45, pg. 186 to 188

Now let's talk about the character you successfully made me hate the most. Rich is a fantastic bad guy. When his mask falls he's not cartoonishly evil but the kind of realistic evil you see everyday that disgusts you way more. Him getting whacked in the face by Spidey is in my opinion, despite some heavy contenders, the best scene in the book. That is how much I dislike Rich and love Spidey.

Plus upon reread, some of his dialogue and actions read a little differently. In the first on screen appearance, when Rich asks Ster if he's "Still...having trouble thinking?" (28), I could just see the gears turning in the man's head, as he considers how Ster's TBI might be his opportunity to get away with murder. The only issue is that I think I disliked him way earlier than was intended. On my first read I immediately concluded that he must be the murderer almost as soon as he was introduced. Might have been the context before going into the book, could have been my own genre savviness. As I kept reading, he never stopped being my main suspect. Sure some of the red herrings had me wondering if perhaps there was more to this crime than it seemed. But I never doubted that Rich had to be hiding something bad.

Knowing that Rich was probably the bad guy did make it frustrating when Ster would happily just tell Rich everything he learned not once but twice. I understand that the purpose is to show that Rich exists in Ster's blindspot, he's everything Ster believes a police officer should be and so despite the evidence Ster's own biases prevent him from seeing the obvious. I don't think you should do anything that takes away from that character arc. I'll point out that the down side of this is that Rich as a character can't have too many obvious flaws, at least none that Ster can see. You can't make him a suspect too early like you can for Bonnie, Juice Dog, or Rodney, because Ster couldn't imagine a cop doing that sort of thing. Making Rich immediately stand out as the one living character in this book who is a perfectly happy family man with a prestigious job and reputation without any real problems.

I'll also acknowledge that other readers won't notice the same alarm bells I did. Talking with other editors on this project has made that clear to me. I also think it's nice that like any good mystery the answer was right in front of the reader all along. But if you want to make the mystery just a little harder, I would consider taking another look at

this first interaction with Rich in Chapter 6. I went through the book again and noted when exactly I started to suspect Rich and this chapter is when it all started. After that scene I started zeroing in on exactly when and how Rich was helping with the case. What I appreciated was that he seemed to do exactly what was expected of him but nothing more, he contacted a good social worker, gave a kid a coloring book, and listened to Ster but nothing substantial ever resulted from that. Ster says a lot of nice things about Rich in the beginning on page 25, but it's clear that none of them really say anything about his character. All that we really know about him is that Ster likes him, he's known him a long time, he's handsome, and his wife and Ster's got a long. The only direct act of kindness attributed to Rich is that he visited Ster in the hospital once.

Meanwhile every other character that helped Ster actually went above the call of duty even when it didn't benefit them. Rich never offered to help drive Ster around like Jay did, didn't go out of his way to help him find clues like Louis did. Rich went to Ster's house multiple times in secret and yet not one of those was ever to check on how he was doing or help him in any way, in sharp contrast to Will, Harper and Bonnie. In short, Rich being an obvious asshole made me love all your characters much more.

My radical suggestion is cutting this introductory office scene in with Rich entirely. It does a great job of expositing about Ster's brain injury but I think I'd suspect Rich less if he stayed as just a voice on the phone for a good chunk of the book. Maybe introduce him in person at the wedding scene, that's a part where I was slightly less suspicious. Probably because I saw him as a loving father and husband for a few pages.

My more reasonable suggestion is that rather than cut any of Rich's scenes you instead cut Will's POV on page 186 to 188. If you were trying to make Will another Red Herring, I think you'd get better results if you stayed out of his head for a little longer. I was suspecting Will when he first appeared but the moment he described himself as "shifty" is when I crossed him off my list. Just felt too easy to suspect him. That was the case for all the character POVs including Bonnie's but excluding Rich for obvious reasons. So a general rule might be that once we get inside a character's head, they are excluded from being murder suspects and all subplots that require them to be murder suspects should be moved around or cut entirely.

## **CONCLUSION**

If it wasn't already obvious, I did read this novel as a detective story similar to Mrs. Marple, Sherlock Holmes, or Columbo, but after my reread I think it has more in common with classic crime noir detectives, of which I'm a little less familiar but deeply respect. While I enjoy a good detective story, the noir vibes are a valuable asset for this book so please don't let my suggestions compromise that. This is a very well done crime/thriller that I'm excited to see on the book shelf.

I hope my thoughts and opinions helped you in the path to the manuscript's final form. Thank you again for getting me hungry for a good mystery again.

Best,

Cameron Grow