

Ask the Reader

READERS EXPLAIN WHAT THEY
WANT TO SEE IN FICTION



StoryEmbers.org



Have you ever wanted to know how to write a book readers will love? What if they told you how to do it?

That is the idea behind the Better Books Survey. I questioned approximately 300 readers on what they look for and avoid in the stories they read. I wanted to find the most common themes that readers were looking for and unearth “gold nuggets”—especially well-worded responses that give keen insight into how writers can craft better books—and then share them all for other authors to learn from!

Here are the questions these survey results cover:

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There's a lot of content you could dive into in this document. My recommendation is to choose the sections that are most relevant to you right now and focus just on those sections. Trying to read through this all at once may lead to content overload. So feel free to skip around to the sections most applicable to you.

Before we dive in, I want to make a few notes about my methodology. All the questions in this survey were open-ended questions where I read through each response individually. The strength of open-ended questions is it allows the respondent to fully express themselves, but the weakness is that some responses require interpretation. For instance, "I want to read more meaningful stories" is a bit vague. Does the respondent mean they want stories with deeper themes, messages that apply to where they are at in life, or messages that align with their worldview?

Theoretically, it could be any of these. In such cases, I have used the context, my knowledge of writing, and intuition to organize answers in the best manner I can, but there will always be a subjective element in doing so. What follows is the most accurate representation of readers' opinions I can provide, but it still should be taken with a pinch of salt. Themes for all sections are listed in descending order of popularity with my comments in italics, unless otherwise noted. Themes corroborated by only two or three respondents have been kept or excluded as I saw fit.

Finally, I should note that the vast majority of respondents for this survey were conservative Christians. At least half of the respondents were also young adults. Other than that, demographics are not possible to judge accurately. Some trends within the responses listed below would vary under a more mainstream readership.

Onward!

-Daeus Lamb

Story Embers Community Director



Part One: Genre Questions

When it comes to writing fiction, you're stuck with using at least one genre. You can ignore it, but it will still be there. The wise writer will pay attention.

To come to grips with a genre, you're going to have to read it yourself, study it, and form your own opinions. At the same time, here you have a host of wisdom from very intelligent readers. Their collective wisdom can outweigh loads of study. Take advantage of it. Ponder it carefully. It may transform your novel.



QUESTION #1: WHAT DO YOU CONSIDER TO BE MOST WANTING IN ADULT LITERATURE?

Of note: because most of the readers surveyed are young and YA is their home ground, I believe that to some degree, commentary on adult literature was just an expression of disgruntlement against bad literature in general. Readers were more cynical about this genre than they were, say, about Young Adult literature (see the following section.)

Major Themes:

- “Cleanness” i.e. content that isn’t graphic or strongly immoral
- “A decent balance between mature content and a good moral standard.”
- On top of being clean, it should be clean without being Amish.
- Wholesome humor.
- Moral absolutes/biblical values. (*Most respondents are sick of moral relativism, but a few want strong role models as well.*)
- Thematic depth.
- Books with strong plots often have shallow themes, while books with deep themes often have shallow plots.
- “Fiction that connects with the real-life struggles of average people.”
- Complex/engaging plots.
- Romance generally in line with biblical standards/realistic romance.
- “Non-romantic historical fiction.”
- Examples of God-honoring marriages.
- Deep, rich characters.
- Books that do not contain romance. (*A general theme which was hard to track, but repeated several times was less romance and more action and mystery.*)
- “Positivity. I’ve read too much adult literature about people wanting to escape from their mediocre, horrible lives, that it’s just not fun to read anymore.” Also: “Fun and happy stories.”
- “A message of hope to go with the realism that is conveyed, or conversely, realism to go with the constant happiness portrayed.”
- “Warmth.”
- Mystery (*often paired with adventure when mentioned.*)



- Healthy friendships.
- The gospel, God, and God's saving grace.
- Good role models.
- "Clean fiction that includes controversial issues. (i.e. how Christians should treat the LGBTQ community, sex/rape, split homes, etc.)"
- Relatable characters. (*This includes characters not being too fantastic or perfect, and deal with relatable issues that aren't often addressed in fiction.*)
- Christian fiction that isn't preachy.
- Real-life situations.

Gold Nuggets:

- "A sense of hope, wonder, and joy in simple, 'childish things'."
- "Adult literature can be serious to a degree that it's unrealistic."
- "Writing style. Too often, it feels like a third draft instead of a final draft."
- "More fantasy set in locations other than knock-off Middle Earth, ha-ha."
- "Realistic female protagonists."
- "Books that will turn into legitimate classics (Like Les Misérables, War and Peace, etc.)"
- "Accurate portrayal of a vibrant Christian life in a natural, appealing manner." Also: "Realistic spiritual struggles/lives."



QUESTION #2: WHAT DO YOU CONSIDER TO BE MOST WANTING IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE?

The tone in this section was noticeably different than in the comments on adult literature.

The respondents seemed to blossom here because most of them are young and YA is their home ground. In contrast to their disgruntlement with adult literature, answers on the YA genre seemed more optimistic in a subtle way, as if problems existed, but they must be overcome. I believe the general tone of this section would be “annoyance”. Respondents weren’t as cynical as they were with adult literature, but instead were generally annoyed as if they expected rich, semi-sweet, artisan chocolate with nut bits in it, but instead got a dirt-cheap milk chocolate bar with an unpleasant aftertaste.

The core complaints for YA are very telling. In one sentence, YA readers don’t feel like the genre speaks to them. How abominable! They feel like authors give them cheap recycled plots because they’re young. On top of this, they’re trying to figure out how to handle romance and relationships in general and they’re being fed unrealistic, immoral, or simplistic clichés. In some instances, this seems to lead to a cynicism toward romance in general.

What YA readers really want are stories about people just like them who struggle with basic stuff like getting a job, time management, and maintaining good family relationships.

Themes:

- Deep themes
- Radical stories that show a new way of looking at life. YA is too generic.
- “Deep, thought-provoking, challenging books.”
- “Hopeful and truthful themes, as opposed to wish-fulfilling cliché tropes meant to make the hero look cool and ‘gritty’... Realistic consequences, but also heroes. Not just anti-heroes, but real, solid heroes. I want to see goodness and truth and growth and depth.”
- “Fiction that contains hard-hitting biblical truths. Too much YA fiction is written merely for the purpose of entertaining youths, making them sigh with pleasure by the end of the book. Even more unfortunate, much of what is labeled Christian fiction is merely a nice story with a few morals sprinkled in to pacify our consciences. What I want is Christian fiction that explicitly communicates solid biblical truths in an engaging way.”



- Bold, countercultural themes.
- “Content that is substantial, meaningful, and answers the deep questions of life that young adults are searching for.” Also: “Age-appropriate handling of difficult moral/ethical situations that encourages young adults to consider tough choices.” And: “What young adults go through (love, jobs, craziness with life).”
- Wholesome relationships (*especially, but not solely, boy/girl relationships—both sexual and platonic.*)
- “Stories for teen and youth that portray a realistic look at relationships (romantic or not) and show their hardships and challenges rather than a strong focus on how people look and happily-ever-after.”
- YA needs to stop with love triangles.
- “Cleanness” i.e. content that isn’t graphic or strongly immoral.
- Moral absolutes/biblical values.
- Morality taught in non-preachy ways.
- Originality.
- “YA needs some originality, and more focus on a great novel and less on a bestselling franchise. The main characters of YA are generally strong, although they all kind of blur into each other—they’re entertaining but don’t stand out. The side characters are generally very flat feeling, without much focus. The idea of the ‘series’ seems to have too much precedence, where the books are fairly short and there’s five of them. A single, thoughtful, and well-fleshed out YA novel with new ideas and not trying to sell you on a whole series with a recycled cast and plot, would be great.”
- Strong family relationships.
- Wise adults (*in YA, adults/parents are too often the bad guys/idiots.*)
- “Young adult literature lacks healthy parent-child relationships, healthy interactions with people outside of the young adult age group itself, and showing elementary-age kids to be the actual intelligence level they are.”
- Less romance.
- Relatable/realistic characters.
- Compelling plots.
- Good descriptions/literary quality/vocabulary.
- “Mature writing that doesn’t write down to commonly used language, but focuses on raising the bar to reflect higher-level thinking and behavior.”
- “Showing” as opposed to “telling” (*conformity to the show-don’t-tell rule.*)



- Deep characters.
- Good role models.
- Realism.
- (Some made complaints against fantasy, I believe as a form of escapism.)
- More historical fiction.
- Hope.
- Stories where God is obviously present.
- More disabled characters (realistically displayed) and more diverse people/beliefs/ages.
- Characters who aren't always moody.

Gold Nuggets:

- “Multi-character stories, like Charles Dickens; because it shows how one person’s choice affects others and the world doesn’t revolve around just one main character.”
- “Stories that show teens can make a big difference” (*Presumably, what is meant is a meaningful impact on other people which moves culture toward a higher moral standard, not just overthrowing the evil dictatorship.*)
- “Books with characters that inspire young people to work hard for what they want out of life and to let them know that it’s not going to be easy or come quickly, but it’s totally worth it in the end.”
- “Books with a Christian message that isn’t the ‘prosperity gospel’ in disguise.”
- “No more misunderstood protagonists!”
- “Pulling out the emotion and depth in everyday lives.”
- “Heroines that aren’t so hardened and ‘manly’.”



QUESTION #3: WHAT DO YOU CONSIDER TO BE MOST WANTING IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE?

One peculiar oddity about the feedback for this section is that some respondents thought children's literature was too basic, while some thought it was too complex. Likely this is due to equivocation on the term "children's literature". A ten-year-old will desire vastly different books than a three-year-old. Answers for this section are really for both children's and juvenile fiction.

Themes:

- Biblical themes or some sort of useful lesson. *(A general theme in many of these comments is that kids can comprehend more than they're given credit for.)*
- This done entertainingly/not preachily.
- "There should be no vagueness of virtue in children's literature. Being young, they must be taught exactly what is right and wrong. Granted, Truth is not simple, but there are stages of development."
- Deep themes.
- "Themes that are important in adult life – instead of letting children just dream about princesses and knights, give them an example of and a chance to do something worthy of the princess."
- The gospel.
- Better developed plots/more tension.
- Some children's books think they can get away with plot holes since they're writing to kids.
- Action/adventure.
- Mystery.
- Strong adult figures/good family relationships.
- Good prose/vocabulary.
- More/better description.
- Show, don't tell.
- Funny stories.
- "Books that ignite wonder and discovery."
- "Children's literature 'writes down' to kids, but it shouldn't."
- "A children's story that can only be enjoyed by children is not a good children's story in the slightest." -C.S. Lewis *(Quoted or otherwise affirmed by respondents.)*



- Deep characters.
- Evolving relationships.
- Originality/not cliché.
- Reality/real circumstances/real consequences.
- Character (as in good character) (*Note: I think many who answered this or 'biblical themes or some sort of useful lesson' subconsciously meant both, though they only said one.*)
- Heroes kids can look up to.
- Children's books are agenda driven these days.
- Happy endings.

- Stories that exercise the mind.
- More genres
- Fantasy (*one person also said less fantasy*).
- Simplicity.
- Children's books have too much foolishness and not enough realistic consequences for actions.
- "Easily understood analogies of the Christian life and God."
- "Books that are written with a protagonist who acts like they are thirteen or fourteen. Too many books have protagonists who act and fall in love like teenagers but are labeled like thirteen. There needs to be more realism where ages are concerned and what a thirteen-year-old is realistically capable of doing."

Gold Nuggets:

- Mature subjects, simplified for understanding.
- "Historical fiction that doesn't feel 'educational'"
- "Books explaining hard concepts to children which they ask questions about but adults find hard to answer."
- "Personally I would appreciate more of the simpler, Winnie-the-Pooh-type stories. There are no antagonists, no having to be something extraordinary, just a bunch of simple yet thought-provoking stories."
- "Stories that inspire selflessness, diligence, optimism, and kindness. On another note, considering the fact that many children consider reading to be a chore, more suspenseful chapter endings may be helpful. Also, for any Christian writers out there, books that introduce the concept of salvation – even if it is subtle (i.e. Aslan from the Chronicles of Narnia)."



- “Most middle-grade books are geared towards relating to kids a little too much. With split parents, school issues, etc. I think we just need good, clean stories. However, I think that most middle-grade books are pretty good, and capture emotion better than most YA books I’ve read!”
- “Children’s literature is honestly usually the best lit out there.”
- “A good children’s book or picture book is one of the greatest things in the world. There are plenty of cute, shallow, entertaining books for children. We need books that are worth re-reading and give the children something that they can take away after reading them.”
- “I love children books! Especially ones written by older authors. Even as an adult I often prefer children’s books to young adult and adult books because of the depth of their characters.”
- “Lovely stories. My favorite books as a kid included Beatrix Potter stories, Winnie the Pooh, books with gorgeous illustrations, and things like the Arabian knights, and Narnia. Stories that made me feel wonder were the best. I never wanted a super simplistic book filled with a predictable story. I wanted quality. Obviously as a kid I couldn’t really say what I wanted exactly, but looking back, I know I wanted quality, wonder-filled stories.” (emphasis added)
- “I read a lot of kid’s books to my little sister who is very logically minded. Whereas I love fanciful, imaginative stuff, she doesn’t, and I think it would be nice for her to have more science/math type books that she can really mentally grasp.”
- “Curiosity of learning new things.”
- “Material that fosters imagination.”
- “Innocence.”
- “Good conflict – unless you’re writing to teach kids to read you **MUST HAVE CONFLICT**. Not just silly ‘everything becomes perfect in three pages conflict’ either. Look at Grimm’s fairy tales. I’m not saying children books need more cannibalism, but they have great conflict and good lessons too.”



QUESTION #4: WHAT CHANGES WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE IN THE ROMANCE GENRE?

A common theme was that romances shouldn't be so cliché, but unfortunately this was rarely accompanied by any explanation of what those clichés were or how to overcome them.

Themes:

- A removal/strong reduction of sex scenes and basic cleanliness.
 - Sometimes clean romance is *defined* by its cleanness when it should be just as much a good story with good characters.
 - An addition of platonic relationships to the story would be beneficial.
 - Less *melodramatic* emotion (dramatic emotion is okay).
- Unconditional love/love of people for who they are on the inside. (*This was often juxtaposed by respondents against exclusively physical attraction.*)
 - More conversation based romance with emotional and mental interaction.
 - More shared work based romance.
- Love stories that focus on the challenges of making a relationship work (a related aspect of this is “realistic romance”).
 - “Stories with middle-age or older couples “falling back” in love and/or teaching a younger couple how to really love each other.” Stories about already married couples.
 - Overcoming an initial stigma against another's looks, transforming into a whole different view of them.
- Slower romance given time to develop.
- No more love triangles.
- The heroine (or hero) shouldn't always have all their romantic dreams turn out for them (including getting the spouse they want). There should be a balance of reasonable sacrifices and losses.
 - Tragic endings
- Better plots.
 - Romances that are also about other things besides romance – romances that are set in the broad context of life.
- More “Jane Austen” type romances.



- Characters who want to honor God
- “HEALTHY relationships. Not one person pining after a jerk, or people being codependent on each other.” Also: “Relationships shouldn't be built off of deception.” Also: “What I don't enjoy and even dislike or hate is a normalized portrayal of toxic or abusive relationships. That goes for underaged ones as well like the teacher/student one for example.” Also: “Healthier relationships. Less men claiming women, less women saying no and being ignored, generally less crap male characters who treat women badly and are considered desirable.”
- No character (I.e. love interest) should be perfect. That's not realistic.
- “Perhaps more sweetness. I think that the romance genre is more focused on falling in love than just being kind to one another.”
- “Less 'bad boys' and 'Mary Sues'.”
- More character development.
- More unexpected romances – ones that play with established tropes.
- “Love being the act of finding joy in being the joy to the object of your love”
- Humor

Gold Nuggets:

- “Some story should deal with the message that you don't have to have a girlfriend/boyfriend to possess worth.”
- The following is an analysis of what should *not* be: “I feel that the outcome of a [modern] romance reader's perspective on life is that A) the next relationship is the better one, or B) they need to find that “ideal” romantic relationship for themselves.”
- “More conversations throughout a text about what they enjoy. For example, discussing music and books etc.”
- (*An expression of disgust with the romance genre:*) “There's no romance at all. Romance is used as a tool to advance in one's career/scheme.”
- (*A paraphrase*) “Finding a spouse as a reward after a character endures hardships, not as something they casually pick up along their road in life. In other words, if characters end up in a good relationship, the reader should feel like they earned it.”
- “I believe other genres (that’s aren’t about the romance) do better at their romance and relationships than the romance genre itself.”
- “More action in it, not only “I love you”... They need to face something together.”



- *(Because this is totally random and makes me laugh.)* “More INFPs as main characters.”
- “Amish romances tend to vary pretty little. Why can’t Amish people be in fantasy settings or have mysteries come to them? I think it would be very interesting to see what Amish people are doing when the world is falling apart or what they would do to try to save the world. Have the romance come into play where maybe two Amish people meet because of the crazy events and fall in love in the whirlwind.”
- “A sense of the two characters having something missing inside of them, exacerbated by a certain conflict, and then that they complete or fulfill one another, would make those kind of books stronger.”
- “Some emotional battles and meaning behind the romance.”
- “Less predictability. Add a twist to the final confession of love.”



QUESTION #5: WHAT CHANGES WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE IN THE SCIENCE FICTION GENRE?

Themes:

- Sci-fi worlds that aren't Godless.
 - Sci-fi that still has warmth to it. Not such cold, depressing worlds.
- Realistic science.
- Less weirdness. Whether that be creepy weirdness or just an otherworldliness that is hard to relate to.
 - Sci-fi should feel real and easy to connect to, even if there are some fantastical elements to it.
- Character depth. A unique story world is no excuse for poor characterization.
- Stories that explore real questions posed by technology.
- Too much sci-fi is a ripoff of Star Wars or other popular sci-fi sagas.
- Less dystopias.
- Sci-fi would be better without aliens.
- Trope subversion.
- Science/worlds that can be understood by laymen.
- Actual honor and care for others.
- Relatable characters.
 - More character flaws.
- Technology that matters to the story on a character and/or thematic level. It's best if technology serves a greater purpose besides just being cool.
- Female protagonists.
- Less info dumping.
- More unique races.

Gold Nuggets:

- “More books aimed towards kids, maintaining the quality of world building and character development, just written for younger people.”
- “Oftentimes writers of sci-fi can forget that us readers have never been to their world before, and



that we would like them to take it a bit slower and let us explore a bit before jumping into the story.”

- “More understanding of the fact that most planets don't have an atmosphere breathable to humans, and most aliens probably can't breathe our atmosphere either.”
- “I want to see more Christian science fiction that isn't afraid to ask the hard questions. We have so many technological advancements in our day and age. Where are the stories that delve into them and ask the moral questions about what we are doing?”
- “A little more variance or genre mixers.”
- “Things written from the alien's perspective.”
- “More philosophical implication of the issues addressed, and solutions for them suggested in narrative.”



QUESTION #6: WHAT CHANGES WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE IN THE FANTASY GENRE?

Themes:

- More unique worlds. (*i.e. not just the standard castles, dragons, and elves.*)
 - Worlds that aren't Middle Earth ripoffs. Writers who borrow elves and such at least need to make them their own.
- Magic shouldn't exist in fantasy/magic is a crutch and shouldn't be used quite so often. (*Note: this was probably not the view of most respondents, but it was the view of a significant number of respondents.*)
 - A removal of the idea of good witchcraft.
- More thoroughly developed settings and worlds.
 - Better descriptions of creatures or other elements not found in the real world so the reader is well grounded.
 - More variety and creativity in settings and worlds.
- Stories with strong lessons/stories that point the reader back to God.
- More creative plots.
- Less/no romance.
 - Clean romance.
- Deeper characters.
- Fantasy can be fantastical, but not to the point where it blurs the lines of reality and feels disconnected from the real world.
- Less darkness and gore, more hope and beauty.
- Unique magic systems.
 - “More exploration in the whole elemental magic thing.”
- The strong female warrior is way overused. There should be feminine girls in fantasy worlds.
- Deeper themes.
 - More time spent on the personal development of the characters.
- Names that are actually pronounceable/that don't sound like they were just made up on the spot.
- Good research. Fantasy requires research too since it needs to mimic reality.
- More dragons.
- More developed villains who aren't just cut and paste evil overlords.



- Standalone fantasy novels/short, manageable series.
- Not those info dumps at the beginning.
- Christian fantasy doesn't *have* to be allegorical
- Parents that have a significant role in the story and aren't just killed off at the beginning of the book.

Gold Nuggets:

- “I feel like we need to remember that each different genre has a different purpose, and with fantasy it's not just 'be cool and do magic stuff as a teenager'. I think the genre as a whole has kind of lost it's purpose in a lot of ways. While scifi is about the future, fantasy is about the past, and not enough people take note or advantage of that.”
- “I'd like to see them focus more on the topic of death--fantasy books are often full of it but the characters rarely stop to see how it affects them.”
- “Less of the proverbial "mystical forest" setting. Too many fantasy novels are set in a magical forest, it gets old. There is also the big fact that the "good guys" always win. While the "good guys" should have some form of victory in the end, the story should be relatable, and in reality, the "good guys" don't always win.”
- “Less half witted, young characters who have no grip on life.”
- “I would like to see evidences of "research". The Fantasy genre is often depicted in a very inaccurate medieval Europe (AD 476-1500). I am sick of how this era have been romanticized into being many things it is not. Like all nations having a somewhat simple straight forward monarchy when really this was not the case! Also, war has been dramatically altered many times into a humane, sanitary, almost video-game type format! The mindset of the medieval person is also not very medieval. These authors have sadly taken the good, and left the bad out in cultures that would eventually become what is probably the most influential continent of the world. Like I said earlier, please research the era you are depicting.”
- “The same depth that one sees in historical fiction, or other genres you have to "study" for. Don't use a fantasy setting as an excuse for fake, lame, stories. Give me something authentic, that cuts deep, just in a fantasy setting.”
- “Keep the language to a minimum. Or invent your own curse words rather than just using modern ones, they jerk you out of the story.”
- “I would like to see writers explore more ideas besides just the "Chosen One" who is an unwilling



hero.”

- “Good, creative, domestic-type magic.”
- “More realism. It’s fine to have dragons, orcs, trolls, elves, dwarves, halflings, etc. It’s not at all realistic, however, for one man to kill a dragon or for two dwarves to defeat a one-hundred-orc army. Yes, even if they’re the heroes. Also, it’s fine to have even major characters die if it improves the story. (And having every single character who sets out on a quest return home definitely does not improve the story.)” (*Editor’s note: it actually is possible for two dwarves to defeat a one-hundred-orc army, it’s just not very likely, would require foreshadowing, and would likely just be an easy escape out of a troublesome situation.*)
- “More variety within cultures (think Deep South, North East, Western, etc...all of which are different cultures within America alone). Also, more cultures in general (what if there were fewer European cultures in your world and more Asian or Middle Eastern cultures?).”
- “No more prophecies, less about elves and more about the other fantasy peoples.”
- “Remember to be consistent with the world you have built. If it is an ancient world, keep the language antiquated. If it is a futuristic world, don’t use modern phraseology. Etc.”
- “Not *just* teenagers being the chosen one in prophecies.”
- “I’d like to see books that rely less on “magic,” particularly in children’s fantasy. Young adults can be more discerning, but I think it’s still best to avoid the use of magic as a force unless it can be explained as something else.”
- “I’d like more unremarkable main characters who must rely on their own wit and mettle instead of magic to succeed.”
- “I’d like for there to be set rules for your extraordinary world, and then I would like for you to stick to those rules no matter what. I know that in fantasy, the author sometimes feels like they have the freedom to do whatever they wish. To add whatever beast, plant, mythical disease, magic spell, etc. into their story without consequences or thought. However, even though a fantasy world, by definition, will be imaginative and impossible, doesn’t mean that it doesn’t still need a sense of realism to it. Make your own rules, let the reader know what they are (even if it’s not right away) and then don’t differ from them.”
- “Intriguing intercultural relations. You tend to only see one country, any others are on the fringes or not at all in most cases, and I’d like to see more of countries being critically connected in some way. I love seeing worlds deeply developed and learning all about them.”
- “more intriguing and thought-provoking...symbolism, bent on communicating how to function in our own world how God designed us to.”



QUESTION #7: WHAT CHANGES WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE IN THE HISTORICAL FICTION GENRE?

Themes:

- Better research!
- Stories about settings and time periods most other novelists don't write about.
- Historical fiction is way to dominated by romance stories.
- More story along with the history.
 - More action.
- A more accurate portrayal of how the different genders really acted historically (particularly in reference to modern feminism being shoved upon historical female characters).
- More history along with the story.
- History that is integrated into the story, not added in in textbook like sections.
- Characters that actually act like they are from the time period in thought, speech, action, etc.
- No unrealistic romanticizing of a time period, place, or person.
- Deeper themes.
- A more in-depth look at the cultures presented in the story.
- A deeper look into the lessons of history (this explored with proper thematic technique).
- A better duplication of authentic time period vocabulary and wording where possible.
- Stories that aren't just placed in a historical setting but are actually influenced by the events going on at the time.

Gold Nuggets:

- “More real life events, less unrealistic adventures and less invincible, not relatable characters.”
- “Stories that point to Christ as the answer for all our historical problems.”
- “Generally speaking, a higher emphasis on historical accuracy in the subgenre known as historical romance. They're so lazy, all they really do is write plain romances with some fantasy clothes thrown in (and quickly thrown off) and worse yet, the people who read them end up thinking this is what the Middle Ages were really like.”
- “Frankly I am slightly tired of the fact that everything always ends happy for the protagonist and [he] always ends up getting the girl.”
- “Don't tell your readers [to] love history, give them a good story set in a historical time period and



that will make them love history.”

- “Do your research. Just do your research. *Especially* with battle scenes. Stupid sword fights are my pet peeve. Another is historical fashion.”
- “More books written in the first person. Sometimes historical fiction feels fake, and needs to be written with more feeling.”
- “It would be nice if historical fiction books weren’t just a time setting but included a lot more culture and historical events inspiring the reader to research and learn beyond the book. What good is a historical fiction book if that same story could be told on another time era?”
- “I would like to see the scripture brought out and how they did/didn't obey/honor it back in the time of which you are writing.”
- “A clear distinction between real facts and surmised guesses. Too often I have read a historical fiction novel and later learned that the part I thought was fact was pure speculation.”



QUESTION #8: WHAT CHANGES WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE IN THE MYSTERY/SUSPENSE/THRILLER GENRE?

Themes:

- Less gore and more respect for human life.
- Subtle clues that allow a smart reader to figure out who the criminal is on their own, but just barely.
- Engaging mysteries that aren't creepy/borderline horror.
 - More innocence.
- More character development.
- Too often, the wrongness of what criminals did is passed over or condoned.
- Detectives shouldn't win all the time, always run into the most curious cases, and generally be unrealistically awesome.
- Deeper themes.

Gold Nuggets:

- “Mystery/suspense/thriller novels that are increasingly broad in depth, with multiple detectives and cases in the same novel.”
- “Never let action scenes die before the climax. Let the heart pounding keep on going. Increase the rate of the book when it is slow, and when the tension is high make it slow down. Let reality sink into the reader. Let them stay on the edge of their seat waiting for something that won't happen when they expect it, but never drop a strenuous climax. Ever. Don't ‘just kid’ the reader. Let them know it will happen, but never know when.”
- “When you resolve the issue don't always clean up every little piece and put a bow on top. It helps readers to remember your story if there is a small thing/s left unfinished.”
- “More meaningful character relationships... (not necessarily romantic)”
- “Characters who do get along with society and are normalish human beings.”
- “Series are better for mystery than stand-alone novels.”
- “I would like to see these genres not rely as heavily on mental health issues, or at least go about them in a more realistic and possibly educational manner.”
- “If there's a plot twist, it shouldn't always be at the end.”



- “Realistic scenarios. It bugs me when the adventures are always falling onto the hero's lap, and often, then the crisis is too cheap and the victory too easily won. You know what's going to happen, and so it's not very thrilling.”
- “I would like the author to use a group of friends that work together to solve the problem. Don't use the same typical people that are in every book.”
- “Mysteries should maintain a focus, not just on the thrilling or the unexpected twist, but on logical and careful story-telling. The focus is not on just an exciting read, but on challenging the reader mentally to follow along.”
- “It happens so often that in order to fool the reader, the writer cheats, and that detracts majorly from the story for me. This happens in many different ways. 1. Blinding Your Reader. We didn't get to see what our protagonist saw, we didn't get to hear what they heard. We're trying to solve the mystery with them yet we don't get the benefit of having all the clues they do... 2. Characters Acting Out of Character. Before we knew John was the murderer he seemed kind and friendly. We see him do many good things ALONE, having no reason to be keeping up any sort of charade because no one is watching him. But, as soon as we discover that John is in fact the villain, he changes. He goes into his 'here's what happened' monologue and explains how he was only acting the whole time. 3. Nothing Adding Up in the End. The plot needs so much for there to be a clue that the author just makes one appear, without backing it up and giving a reasonable explanation as to why or how it got there.... The detective follows the clues to further the story, but at the end of the day, it doesn't make sense.”



QUESTION #9: WHAT CHANGES WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE IN THE HORROR GENRE?

Whether horror has any potential as a genre for Christians is not a subject this section will cover, but whatever your opinion this section contains some thought-provoking ideas on story intensity, violence, and darkness. I tend to be this type of reader myself, but my reason for asking this question was a sense of curiosity. While I have always strongly disliked anything horrific (except maybe *The Tell Tale Heart*), I have wondered if perhaps a very *specific, carefully crafted* horror story might be legitimate for exploring such themes as guilt or how human thinking can lead to terrible consequences. The answers below spike my interest, though I personally am still somewhat skeptical.

Themes:

- Horror should be an emotional thing, not a sensory thing. In other words, the book should rely on anticipation and imagination rather than on splattering guts everywhere.
- Take out the supernatural/demonic.
- A grounding perspective/truth and hope to anchor onto in the midst of the chaos.

Gold Nuggets:

- “Keep it scary, but don’t let the horror blow its top or the reader will set down the book. Once the fear is near -not at- it peak, let it stay there until the climax, then let it decrease ever so slightly before letting it erupt in their faces.”
- “Horror is not the same a Gore. Entice your readers, don't gross them out.”
- “Much less 'beautiful innocent female thrown into horrible supernatural situations'. Make the main character an older man, or a woman in her forties.”
- “Characters that make more thought out and smart choices when possible.”
- “I'd like to see a horror book where it doesn't have to involve ghosts or paranormal activities. I want to challenge and to be challenged to write a book wherein all the events occurring have an explanation (although every explanation doesn't have to be revealed. The reader can find out for himself or herself).”



QUESTION #10: WHAT CHANGES WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE IN THE ACTION/ADVENTURE GENRE?

Themes:

- More backstory.
- Much better character arcs.
- More original plots.
- More female leads.
 - But not the “I am a warrior, therefore that makes me interesting” type female leads.
- Not just solo guys/girls having all the adventures. There should be groups of people or families sometimes.
- Realism.
- Deeper themes. Action alone isn't substantial enough to sustain a novel.
- (Using technical writing terminology) more *reaction* scenes.

Gold Nuggets:

- “Focus on character backstories and why they do what they do.”
- “Create an adventure around a moral dilemma rather than around rescuing the damsel in distress!”
- “Better character development/less baddie assassin fully decked out in leather with the personality of a shoe.”
- “Don't sacrifice dialogue for an action scene. Don't cut emotion out of your adventure.”
- “More characters who have to make decisions. Adventure novels need constant excitement; but they also need a moment when a character stands up for the right, or shows determination, or makes a sacrifice. But all that needs to be balanced out by actual, enjoyable action.”
- “Something other than the classic: main character goes on adventure, gets captured, gets rescued, does whatever they have to do and end up back at home safe and sound. I mean, I know that's like the general plot of any novel, but my sister won't really read any action adventure novels for that reason: they are all too predictable.”



- “I would also love to see more backstory behind how adventure characters become adept in surviving and thriving in adventure, how they became fighters, and things like that. It would be great to leave the book inspired to be a hero myself, to be self-sacrificing and persevering and daring.”
- “A lot of authors...think choppy sentences mean action... it doesn't.”
- “More modern day adventure novels, set in this century.”
- “Don't overdramatize or over narrate.”



QUESTION #11: WHAT CHANGES WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE IN THE DYSTOPIAN GENRE?

Themes:

- Variety. Too much dystopia is just a rip off of The Hunger Games, Divergent, or one of the other another big name dystopian novels.
- Less reliance on romance.
 - And less love triangles.
- An element of hope (particularly in the ending).
- For it to not always be about teens rebelling against the evil government/for teens to be displayed more realistically especially with what they're able to accomplish/for there to be non-teen characters.
- For variety, dystopias where the evil in the society is rooted somewhere other than in the government. (i.e. in the general democratic populace.)
- A more realistic representation of societal development, what leads to a dystopian society, how it would reasonably operate, and what the side effects would be of a successful revolution.
 - More realistic worlds in general. Just because it's set in a make believe world doesn't mean it should throw out reality.
- More diverse settings.
- For it to not be too gory or unnatural/weird.
- More honorable characters.
- To have male leads.
- Better character development.
- A larger focus on society in general and not such a secluded focus on the protagonists.
- For it to address real life issues.

Gold Nuggets:

- "I'd love to see the world before it collapses, and then watch it collapse, like a tragedy."
- "A government that isn't cruelly controlling people, but is instead giving them an illusion of safety and control of their own lives, and in that way controlling them. How about a world where the government are the good guys and the people are the bad guys because they want things done their



own way.”

- “I think it would be really good if there is a lot less glorification of darkness, while still dealing with it.”
- “Expand outside of just American trouble. Throw more bilingual characters with destroyed (or maybe over thriving) homes. Dystopian is the future. The future is more elaborate, not simplified or confined.”
- “Stronger themes of friendship and family and perhaps a little less anger and a little more hope.”
- “...Also, more nature. We're not going to TOTALLY destroy the earth, people.”
- “[I find problem with] the unrealistic/vague reason that everything is the way it is [a standard dystopian novel will provide about its story world].”
- “No more post-apocalyptic America!!! Try a story placed in England or Russia, and let there be real grief over what has been lost.”
- “There can be story arcs beside - ‘World is messed up and romance is still a thing between teens.’”
- “A more varied view of what makes a person strong: protagonists who are gentle and kind, yet morally strong, and characters who have other assets than their physical strength and emotional toughness.”
- “Accurate psychological responses to hardship.”



Part Two: Overall Story Questions

In keeping with the idea that readers are smart, I wanted to go beyond basic disgruntlement with literature or specific genres deep down into the nitigrities of writing. Many of the questions in this section are ones that writers are constantly asking themselves. They dive into character development, prose, reader engagement, etc. Are you ready to see what readers have to say?



QUESTION #12: WHAT MADE THE MOST INSPIRING NOVEL YOU'VE EVER READ SO INSPIRING?

This section was highly encouraging to me. Everyone's responses showed me that books do change lives. A few shared specifically how they were changed and many, many of the respondents were clearly inspired, encouraged, or challenged by their favorite book. Their testimonies were moving.

The themes for this section are **not** necessarily listed in any order of popularity.

Themes:

- The depth of human experience.
- Thematic breadth.
- Vivid characters.
- Characters who were inspiring in their example.
- Well done allegory.
- Characters with deep, hard to overcome challenges.
- Character struggles that were personal to the reader.
- Depth of emotion.
- Themes that were lofty and inspiring.
- Open-mindedness – the story looked at issues from many angles.
- Plots (and especially endings) that evolved from what they first appeared they would be into something even better.
- Symbolism.
- Excellent writing style.
- It showed what life is like for other types of people. It promoted empathy.

Gold Nuggets:

- “The willingness to dig into deep emotion, both sad and positive.”
- In reference to The Wingfeather Saga: “While I was reading the part where Janner realizes he's selfish, I realized that I'm selfish too, and it inspired me to change that and become more selfless.”
- “It had a beautiful mixture of joy and sorrow, of victory and loss.”



- “I think the depth, the complexity, and the truth of it. It makes you think, makes you feel and care for each and every one of the characters; there’s so much symbolism and theme. No matter how many times it’s read, there’s always something new.”
- “When the character has issues that most people suffer from (e.g. feeling stupid, having a crush, not understanding what anyone else is saying, bad memory, etc..)”
- “It took the struggle that I was facing and put it in a different light. It clearly analyzed each possible outcome, the choices that were required, the costs, the benefits, and how to find the wisdom and strength to conquer the difficulty I was facing.”
- “Almost every single page had something on it that dealt with an issue I was struggling with. The character was so real to me, I had to finish the book, and then re-read it to see how the character dealt with her issues, and it gave me hope that I might conquer them too.”
- “The emotional plot line made a huge impact on me because it was a story about a friendship, where the ENTIRE story circulates around the characters. The character doesn’t influence the story, he IS the story.”
- “The Lord of the Rings was the epitome of everything I had ever wanted in a story. I know it sounds weird, but it felt like I had finally found the story I had always been looking for but that I had given up on finding. It felt like this story had been written just for me.. I don’t know that there’s one thing I can say that encapsulates why I was wonderstruck by the story. Maybe the biggest thing was that it was a story which someone had poured their soul into. Middle Earth felt alive to me. It was SO rich and full and the attention to detail was amazing. It felt like it had been written so that a story was chronicled, not so that it could teach a lesson or make a statement. It felt like a loved story.”
- “Any novel that inspires me is going to be one that challenges my views without being pushy about it – one that doesn’t necessarily oppose my views, but basically asks a question I don’t know how to answer.”



QUESTION #13: WHAT KEEPS BOOKS FROM ENGAGING YOU EMOTIONALLY?

Original Survey Wording: “Think back to a book that never managed to engage you emotionally. It could also be a book that started off great but then lost your interest. What do you think kept that book from engaging you?”

The themes for this section are **not** necessarily listed in any order of popularity.

Themes:

- Characters.
- Lack of clear emotional goals and drives for the characters.
- Flat characters.
- The characters weren't relatable (*often because they were too perfect*).
- The characters lack emotions.
- Too stereotypical.
- Lack of growth/development, or conversely unrealistic growth.
- The characters were total jerks and impossible to care about.
- Lack of action.
- Too much backstory or historical explanation.
- Not enough conflict or suspense/nothing really happening.
- Issues of immoral content.
- Boring dialogue.
- Bland character/narrating voice(s).
- Unnecessary, poor, or excessive descriptions with too many big words.
- Telling rather than showing.
- A slow beginning.
- A lack of realism.
- Inaccuracies.
- Preachiness.
- Flat or unrelatable story worlds.
- Didn't fulfill on their foreshadowing.



- Too many point-of-view changes.
- Writing style was too simple.
- Sloppy or overly simple/cliché plot.

Gold Nuggets:

- “Books with unrelatable characters of course do this, but it’d be hard to say what exactly about them was unrelatable, except that they didn’t seem to have yearnings and weaknesses that felt solid. Also, books that seem to promise something and then don’t deliver, tend to lose my interest.”
(Note: this is the best succinct explanation on why some characters are unrelatable I have ever heard.)
- “A false title – it gave the impression of excitement and a specific tumultuous event, and as I read, the suspense continued to grow as I waited for it to happen – and then it never did, leaving me quite disappointed.”
- “The characters act irresponsible, lovesick, or inactive.”
- “I think it was how the author wrote. I don’t think the author wrote the characters like they were real people.”
- “The characters didn’t have realistic struggles. Or if they did, they didn’t express them in a way that drew me into their shoes.”
- “There weren’t any meaningful relationships/friendships between any of the main characters.”
- “Slow-ish pacing, maybe lack of meaningful action? There was action, it just wasn’t done in an appealing manner, nor did it have explicit meaning in the story other than to set the charries [sic] back on their quest.”
- “I also enjoy stories that clearly set things up at the beginning of the story. I don’t need spoilers or intense foreshadowing, but the protagonist’s clear goal and mission. Plot twists are fun, but I don’t like to be clueless as to where I’m going. Part of what helps me get committed to the character is when I’m aware of what he/she wants or is planning.”
- “Possibly the lack of a positive story goal; it seems like there’s a lot of things to root against in the book I’m thinking of, but nothing to look forward to even if the hero wins.”
- “The rules of the world becoming too ‘form on demand’ and not staying consistent with themselves.”
- “The protagonist being dragged along by the plot, rather than the one who leads the story and makes decisions for himself/herself.”



- “It was the lack of meaning. It had no meaning – it never made me look at the world differently... It was void of what is really the meaning of existence, and it was also void of passion. The writer had no passion or enjoyment in the subject they were writing on.”



QUESTION #14: WHAT MAKES A CHARACTER COME ALIVE TO YOU?

Themes:

- When I can follow their thoughts, dreams, motivations, emotions, struggles, etc. and they seem real to me.
 - Struggles are especially important. Characters need to struggle.
- A strong personality/character voice.
 - Wit and humor are popular.
 - Quirks and habits round off a character.
 - Unless circumstances change their personality, they need to act basically the same over the course of the book to stay believable.
- When they have flaws (*especially fears and misgivings, but also sin issues*).
- Poignant actions, body language, dialogue, etc that gives readers insight into their character using the principles of show don't tell.
- When they have engaging relationships/interactions with others.
 - The way they treat people socially or morally beneath them.
 - Romance.
- They need to develop. They need to have character arcs. A stagnant character is not interesting.
- Their complexity and/or duplicity. There are many sides to their personality.
 - When these differences within themselves leads to inner turmoil.
- They have a past that is influential in their current lives.
- When they have something honorable about them (especially when they make sacrifices for others).
- A good description of their appearance (*preferably in the first chapter*).
- The use of deep POV.
- Grit. Whippiness is no fun to read about. Neither is a character who doesn't face tough circumstances.
- When they sometimes make wrong choices.
- A living faith. (*Editor's note: I am not sure I agree that this is necessary to bring a character to life, but it can certainly help bring God to life in the story, which is just as important.*)
- When they are truth-discoverers, meeting the world head-on and learning from it.



Gold Nuggets:

- “Realistic internal monologue.” (*Editor's note: sadly, a lot of internal monologue is unrealistic.*)
- “They talk and laugh and glare like the average person and talk about life's ups and downs!”
- “The way they speak. Their well-rounded characters that make you laugh even if it's not funny when they say something that is 'totally what they would say.’”
- “Understanding how they view themselves in the context of their world.”
- “They should want and they should dream.”
- “A character that struggles, one that can't climb every mountain and speak every speech beautifully.”
- “Give them flaws and good qualities. Make them likable. But also make us groan over them. But by the end they need to have progressed and become better.”
- “They have a bit of "normality" to their lives. A dislike, a simple thing that makes them happy, or younger siblings—something that tons of people have.”
- “Thinking larger than the problem at hand.”
- “Struggle, I think. Struggling even to do the right thing or what they perceive as the right thing, struggling with both right and wrong— internal and external. Choosing right despite struggle causes admiration and hope. Choosing wrong despite struggle causes sympathy and relatable fear. Without struggle, the character seems flat and fake. No one becomes who they are, protagonist or antagonist, without struggle of some kind. Continued struggle mirrors life also, so it's very relatable and realistic.”
- “When people just write the story their heart is telling them to write and don't worry about anything else.”
- “Learning about their passions and the people they care about.”
- “[When they] don't have perfect looks.”
- “When he does something only he would do and you know him well enough to see that.”
- “A conflicted character. One that is not perfect and throughout the story is confronted with a deep and upsetting problem, one that shakes the very ground that they stand on.”
- “Their actions and thought processes are affected by a deep, scarring flaw that I have as well.”
- “Paradoxes. A paradox, the way I've been taught, is something that looks like a contradiction but really isn't. Nicholas Benedict acts super cheerful all the time, even though his life is rotten and he



knows it, but his cheer isn't really an act so much as it is a conscious choice for how he *is*.”

- “Expression, not all in one way, such as grimacing, but in many different ways like any real person.”
- “When I feel that the character is going to have a tangible impact on the story (positive, negative, whatever). I.e., when a character enters a situation, and I think "well they're going to have something to say about this" or "what will happen when so-and-so shows up?" When the characters are presented to us with certain traits, but those never really change the flow of the story, I stop trusting them and they fall flat.”
- “More often than not there's a mentor character (a wise old grandpa, a teacher, etc.) that no matter what they do or say, you know that the author supports them. It is as if the author is speaking instead of the character, and that gives that person more power than anyone else in the story. When I read, I don't want to hear the author's voice, I want to hear the character's voices that the author created.”
- “Characters who think about things, and the implications of their actions.”



QUESTION #15: WHAT SEPARATES A GREAT PROTAGONIST FROM AN EVERYDAY PROTAGONIST?

There were a number of times respondents answered “relatability” for this question, but it wasn't clear exactly what they meant by that. In such cases, I chose not to track the responses rather than categorize them based on whim.

Themes:

- A great protagonist has relatable faults and internal conflict.
 - They must struggle deeply and be honest with themselves. (*These struggles are most poignant when they are deep struggles that readers face themselves.*)
 - At some point, they should be offered an opportunity to return to their old life, but grit their teeth and press on.
- A great protagonist must also have heroic virtues that help us root for him.
 - Traits that make a good hero: grit, compassion, selflessness, firm ideals, humility, and integrity.
 - A hero isn't just a “basically good” person. They do *unexpected* things because it is right.
- Seeing inside the protagonist's head – understanding who they are, what makes them that way, and what emotions they feel. (*Editor's note: be careful to do this using the techniques of “show don't tell”!*)
 - Particularly, readers want to understand the protagonist's fears.
- A dynamic character arc (one that is realistic, complex, intense, and meaningful).
- Strong goals and yearnings.
 - These need to drive the protagonist to be proactive, not reactive.
- A unique voice.
- Great protagonists have deep, meaningful relationships with other characters.
- A *meaningful* backstory.
- Details (habits, accents, etc.)
- A great protagonist can be defeated.
- When the protagonist is just an ordinary person who becomes special, not because of their abilities, but because of how their journey changes them.
- A living faith.
- When an author uses “show don't tell”, that really helps a protagonist come alive.



Gold Nuggets:

- “A new voice; a fresh pair of eyes that sees the world in a very different way and makes you think about things you've never thought of before.”
- “A protagonist that explores and discovers the truths of human nature (intrinsic to the character) and human experience (extrinsic to the character) is an underrated "must" for all literature”
- “Basically, how much time the author took to develop them.”
- “A passion for the small joys in life and a love of family.”
- “Someone who feels emotions and cannot deal with it sufficiently on their own.”
- “Being witty and excellent at playful banter is a plus.”
- “One that I can relate with, who is battling the same things I am, struggling to find truth amidst webs of lies. One who fails, but rises again. One who does (or learns to) look past themselves to the needs of others around them, even if it means sacrificing their own desires.”
- “A great protagonist struggles inwardly, and outwardly. They don't always make the best decisions, and sometimes they are selfish. They make mistakes, and sometimes, they don't want to "save the world." I like books and stories that bring out the normal everyday sort of person (with their own backstories and struggles, like everyone), and helps them slowly to rise and learn things as they experience the good and bad that happen to them.”
- “Everyday protagonists tend to just have physical battles with little else. Great protagonists cover all the basis: physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual battles.”
- “They generally want two things that conflict with each other.”
- “They need to be unique, different eras and languages and origins, yet mixing them, like elves with beards and axes that live in caves!”
- “A character who has to make sacrifices to save himself/his friends from his own villainy.”
- “What makes them great is the fact that they fight their weaknesses almost, if not more, than they fight the opposition. They have to be strong because they have purpose weighing on their shoulders and they are fighting both their physical enemy and their inner demons.”
- “The great protagonist has an idea that commands the attention of the entire book. If there's wiggle room for bunny trails and distractions, your MC isn't strong enough or isn't struggling



enough.”

- “A protagonist that is proactive, evolves over the course of the story, and has a strong relationship with another MC or supporting character.”
- “A great protagonist is one who wonders.”
- “He is 'normal' and relatable, yet he must stand apart from others.”
- “...not brooding or goofy.”
- “Honesty; greatness out of weakness.”
- “Small awkward moments.”
- “Great protagonists have secrets that they either want to or need to keep to themselves.”
- “There are too many protagonists who take everything too seriously. They have no time for humor, and sometimes no time for romance.” (*Editor's note: there are also some characters who are the exact opposite.*)
- “Their flaw is the reason things go wrong.”
- “They need to fail, enough that the reader thinks it is over.”
- “Great protagonists are just a little above normal. They're doing the things you wish you could do, the things that you hope you have the courage to do but you don't actually [do] yet.”
- “A great protagonist is a person who is unpredictable.”
- “Believability. A protagonist that is too perfect is unrelatable and unbelievable. A protagonist that has too many flaws and whines a lot about all of his or her own problems is annoying.”



QUESTION #16: WHAT SEPARATES A GREAT VILLAIN FROM AN EVERYDAY VILLAIN?

Themes:

- A great villain is empathetic and relatable. Even if they do worse things than normal people, their motivations and emotions should be very relatable to normal people. They should think of themselves as the hero, not the villain.
 - *But villains still need to be bad.* A “misunderstood” villain is *not* a good villain.
 - Villains should have weaknesses, insecurities, and emotions.
 - When a villain has some good qualities, that helps us sympathize with them. It's good when the villain is heroic in some areas.
 - With a great villain, you can see yourself in him and that makes you afraid.
 - Sometimes, the best villains are the ones who hate who they are or who try to do good but get caught up in a mess they can't escape from. Examples: Kylo Ren and Gollum/Smeagol. (*Editor's note: this only works if their commitment to the life they're entangled in is stronger than their desire to escape from it. Also, they must not wax whiny about how horrible it is they're a bad person.*)
- A realistic explanation of what made them become bad. (Not random monomania or cut and paste tragic backstories.)
 - Out of this motivation, the villain develops a vision which drives him forward. He's not just being reactive against the people who have hurt him. He has a plan for the world he wants to see set in motion.
- A great villain is powerful and smart. It is best when they seem unstoppable.
 - In some cases, villains can be sympathetic simply because they're very skilled and careful about what they do. Excellence is something humans generally appreciate.
 - A great villain is more impressive than the other villains in the story.
- One with a personality as vivid as the protagonist's.
- One the reader can hate/that is truly evil.
- A backstory that is fascinating in its own right.
 - A bad childhood is not an excuse for villainy.
- The villain is the perfect opponent for the protagonist. He catches the protagonist where he is weakest tactically and/or thematically. He should force the protagonist to change either for good



or bad. It is even better if he is a picture of what the protagonist could become.

- A great villain is unpredictable.
- A villain you can hope for, whether they turn good or not.
- A great villain is mysterious.
- A great villain does not use evil monologues.
- A great villain catches you off guard. He does not seem like a villain at first.
- When the villain has scenes from his POV.

Gold Nuggets:

- “Someone who can make you hate them but also feel sorry for them and also feel like your heart is breaking when they take action. Think Gollum from LOTR.”
- “The antagonist should work in shades of gray--if he's all black then the evil force isn't worth much to the reader. all black isn't connectable, and the best villains are the ones you sort of want to root for.”
- “A great villain is someone, who deep down, cares. Maybe not for everyone, but they do have family or friends who they would protect.”
- “The great villains are the ones you can understand. Not agree with or like, but understand. You're frightened by their actions in a very real way because you realize that, in the wrong circumstances, you might become that monster. The scariest types of villains are the ones that feel real and familiar.”
- “The most important thing is for him to actually have a personal relationship to the main characters in some way. They don't even have to know each other, but the villain needs to personally affect the main characters.”
- “A great villain would be someone that makes you think he is good, and then turns on you.”
- “A great villain is someone who is so cunning, so evil, that they are always one step ahead of the good guys. They are so good at being bad, that it almost kills the protagonist and everyone they love before they can defeat the villain.”
- “Let them be a character your reader wishes they didn't like.”
- “Great villains are also integral to the plot and theme (and especially the protagonist's arc), and you could not have the same story if you switched the villain.”
- “In Christian books: villains that are villains, not straw men who serve to illustrate the sermon.”
- “One that is...similar to the protagonist in many ways, but completely opposite in the ways that



matter.”

- “Break my heart over the villain, but don’t let me excuse his behavior.”
- “I also like it when the villains are described to not necessarily look like villains, but just like normal people with, possibly, darker features (darker as in 'bad' not darker as in darker colors.)”
- “There are many different kinds of great villains. They need to be formidable; an actual challenge for the protagonist to take on. Some villains need a touch of heart, while others should be cold and dry. Most of all, he needs to be in the wrong, and the story must make it clear that wrong is wrong and that's why the protagonist must stand up to him, no matter the cost.”
- “[A great villain is] best of all, the protagonist himself!!! Put him in a mess where he has to be the bad guy and doesn't know how to get out or if he should get out or if he wants to get out.” (All caps removed.)
- “...To be interesting, usually a character has to do something. If you want a reader to dislike or even pity the villain they have to do something other than sit in the dark kicking puppies and waiting for the hero to stop them.”
- “A great villain will not have a single goal in mind, but two or three...Many people use villains as victims of circumstance. I prefer the villain who made a choice, that they might regret or not, but was their choice.”
- “The great villain takes a good virtue to such an extreme that it becomes bad.”
- “...I notice that this attitude that "bad guys" are a separate class of people without normal thoughts and feelings carries over into real life too, which is just nuts.
- “The ability to hide their motives.”
- “[A great villain will] make a conscious choice for redemption or the rejection thereof.”
- “One who leaves me psychologically suspended, constantly wondering what corner he or she is going to show up around next.”



QUESTION #17: WHAT COMMON STYLISTIC PROBLEMS IN MODERN FICTION BUG YOU?

Original Survey Wording: “If you read a lot of modern fiction, are there any common stylistic problems that bug you? (Some examples of stylistic problems would be an author using too many fancy words, not describing his setting enough, using flashbacks ineffectively, etc.).”

Themes:

- Under describing things/doing so very poorly--especially for the setting.
- Insipid or trashy prose/prose with basic vocabulary that doesn't challenge readers at all
 - Too many fragmented sentences. Fragmented sentences should be used sparingly.
 - Cliché descriptions.
- Telling.
 - Explaining things to the reader, especially through internal monologue. (In large quantities, these are called info dumps, but they can come in very small, subtle quantities too.)
 - Bland or shallow emotions.
- An overuse/poor use/any use at all of flashbacks.
- Over describing things (*Editor's note: [I have an article explaining how much to describe and how to do it well.](#)*)
- Stories that are tightly knit together right up till the last smashing scene — in other words, cohesive plots.
- Verbosity/a sloppy use of big words.
- Characters who seem like real people (i.e. not stereotypes or basic personifications of political correctness).
- Dialogue that doesn't fit the era, class, or district that the speaker belongs to.
- Too many adverbs.
- A lot of dialogue is meaningless and/or not very clever.
- Trying to force readers to adopt a point of view, such as liking a certain character when little apparent work has been put into making the character legitimately likable.
- Quote: “The ones you mentioned.”
- An overabundance of POV shifts.



- Very poor *in medias res* that fails to get the reader emotionally connected with the characters and setting.
- Modern fiction generally isn't thought provoking and doesn't have deep themes.
- Characters that act too much older or younger than their age.

Gold Nuggets:

- “Not enough body language, or, worse, constantly repeating the same body language over and over again.”
- “Characters with an unrealistically high pain tolerance and healing rate.”
- “[Modern fiction expects] such a low reading level. Readers should be pushed to learn as well as be entertained by the books they read.”
- “The tick list of token characters to make sure the reader knows you aren't racist/homophobic/intolerant/whatever. If it's not relevant to the plot, you're just shoehorning politics into a perfectly good story.”
- “Having an informal voice that is always using short, choppy sentences and never doing anything different.”
- “In trying to explain how the world works and who the character is many authors put the main character inside their head too much. Especially in the beginning the character starts thinking things about their ordinary world that they probably wouldn't actually think. Like how interesting this supposedly normal thing is. Or they become overwhelmed with memories about stuff even though there is nothing to trigger those memories. It is unrealistic for a character to be analyzing a situation that should be normal for them. And it is an info dump out of the mouth, or through the mind, of a character.”
- “Too many short, one-liners. They're supposed to come in at opportune times to pack the punch, but a lot of modern writers use them like they're standard paragraphs and they lose their power.”
- “One of my pet peeves is an unclear timeline. It's okay to jump back and forth between past, present, and future, but make sure it's clear!”
- “The adjective adjective girl walked adverb adverb down the adjective adjective hall.”
- “In modern Christian fiction, I think the most common problem I see are unrealistic struggles. The MC might have a really big problem, but the author doesn't write about the process realistically, so it seems flat and uninteresting... Also, with Christian fiction, I think authors tend to make Christian life too easy.”



- “If you want to have two main character do not use first person! I love first person stories, but if you have it were there are two main characters and you jump from one to the other throughout the book it is really annoying.” (All caps removed.)
- (Editor’s note: this doesn’t *directly* relate to the topic, but I thought it was too insightful to leave out.) “Reading level matters, and if your scary novel is super easy to read, seven-year-olds are going to read it. And be scarred by it. Make your reading level match your content.”
- “Constant dark backstories don't make your characters cool and 'damaged.' It's called mentally unstable.”
- “One thing I've noticed in most modern fiction that I have read is that modern authors tend to really emphasize the ugly things of reality. I realize that it is important to portray sin and its effects as they are but I am not sure whether it is right to dwell on these things more than on the many beautiful things that still remain, even in this fallen world.”
- “I don't like it when the author keeps having a character "die", only for it to turn out that the character didn't die. If they do that once it is fine, but if they do it over and over again it begins to bug me.”



QUESTION #18: IF YOU AVOID CERTAIN KINDS OF CONTENT, HOW DO YOU DECIDE IF A BOOK IS OKAY TO READ?"

Original Survey Wording: "If you are careful about the content and tone of the books you read (i.e. you don't read gritty novels), what signs do you look for in a story that indicate it's okay for you to read?"

Themes:

- When the book generally conforms to my values, I expect it to continue to do so. I read the first part of the book to get a taste of it. If the author show signs of being tactful, I expect them to continue like that. If the author tends to be more explicit, if they show signs of not having a moral compass, or if the book has a dark tone, I will put it down. Tone is very important. *(Lessons: the first few pages of your novel are crucial. Intentionally build trust right from the start.)*
 - Common values include the following: no-magic (held to by a subset, but not others), respect for family, girls don't need to act masculine to have value, no language, no explicit sex, minimal/no gore, substance abuse shouldn't be glorified, actions should result in realistic consequences.
- I look for books friends/people I respect recommend.
- The synopsis doesn't give me a bad impression. *(Lessons: Be very careful what goes here. When you write a blurb, ask some picky readers to tell you what type of vibes they get from it.)*
- I read the editorial reviews/customer reviews (particularly what the critical reviews say or I'll look at positive reviews to see if they contain red flag keywords).
- I judge a book by its cover. If a cover has a certain tone, I expect the book to have that same tone. *(Lessons: choose your cover designer carefully as they will have some control over the tone of your cover. Also, get lots of feedback on the tone of your cover.)*
 - This includes the book's title.
- I look for a hint that there will be a meaningful message to the story. *(Lessons: Focus on weaving deep themes into your stories and write about characters who are seeking truth.)*
- A character's "voice" and general demeanor can set off warning signals. Even if they haven't done anything bad yet, if their voice feels edgy, I suspect they might at any moment. Similarly, if they have a generally clean attitude, I will expect their actions to line up. *(Lessons: readers generally need at least one character they can morally support in a story [it is best if this is the protagonist]. If you're going to write about characters with bad morals or a trashy attitude, carefully indicate to your reader through the*



tone of your book that you are not encouraging the same behavior.)

- I'm generally turned off by romance because of how I've seen it handled in the past. *(Lessons: if you're trying to sell romance to an audience that doesn't normally read romance, be aware that it is an uphill battle. The tone of your cover and synopsis will become especially important.)*
- I judge a book by what I know of the author as a person. *(Lessons: carefully word your author bio and act professional in public and online.)*
 - If I know an author is a Christian, I'll trust them more. *(Lessons: consider mentioning your faith in your bio, dedication, your blog, or somewhere else.)*
- I judge a book by its genre. *(Lessons: know the stigmas associated with the genre you write in and be prepared to ease readers minds on those accounts.)*
- I am turned off by any seemingly meaningless violence.
- I generally read juvenile fiction because I expect it to be cleaner/I pay attention to suggested age ranges.
- A tone of hopefulness increases my trust in the book.
- A general trashy writing style makes me expect content issues.

Gold Nuggets:

- “Does it emphasize human ability more than trust in God? If so it's probably not worth my time.”
- “I try and avoid the words "sexy", "dark", "alluring" "beautiful" when describing a male, and stories where the heroine can't pull herself away from the "mysterious man". I also avoid stories that use the spelling "faerie" instead of "fairy", 'cause normally they are about some girl who is caught between the fae and human world and normally involve love triangles.”
- “I don't like lots of wish-fulfilling content in my books (mature or otherwise), so I mainly watch the protagonist. If they seem to blatantly portray the type of person the target readers would greatly admire or dream to be (I.e. aggressively “cool” or “tough” or rude and sarcastic for no real reason except to be “edgy”, or a Mary Sue) and the world worships them or gives them the response the readers would want in their place, but that isn't realistic to their actions, then I'm wary.”
- “Is this book loved by both believers and non-believers?”
- “What are people reading that read this?”



Conclusion

Wasn't that a wealth of insight?

It will not only help you write book that will sell, but some of the advice dove into the true heart and power of storytelling. I hope you're sorting through all of this and thinking, "I want to write *this* type of book. The world really can use authors like you."

At Story Embers, we want to help you write that book so you can make an impact. Keep an eye out for our newsletter and our weekly articles where we dive into the techniques, ethics, and purpose of successful writing. To really grow, get plugged into our community on the forum and share your writing journey. From there, join the ride as we work to unite writers, build resources and opportunities, and spark a renaissance in quality Christian storytelling.

To your success,

Daeus Lamb

Story Embers Community Director