

Beta Reading Questionnaire

HOW TO USE: These questions can be thought triggers, discussion prompts, answered however works best for you. You *don't* need to answer every one.

Overall Impression:

- What's something that you wanted to happen in the book that didn't happen?
 - A stronger friendship storyline for Brielle, either with Mia (making the reveal more emotional for Brielle), Aiden (prior to the very very end, where he's kind of boxed into a friendship-with-men-is-normal analogy), Ebony or even Vivianne
 - More about Caleb. What are his dreams, aspirations, etc, beyond his relationship with the protagonist and his sister?
 - Kinsley. She's crazy, and is a jilted ex. She doesn't like Brielle because of her mother. But there isn't much more detail beyond that.
 - More detail on the adoptive parents. The first page establishes that the parents didn't tell her she was adopted for an arguably selfish reason, then other scenes show that her parents are good, selfless and loving people. I love that complexity, and feel it could be explored even more, especially after her birth parents are found and become apart of her life again. How does that change the relationship with her adopted parents? It would an interesting and unique perspective to bring in.
- From a reader's point of view, did you enjoy reading this story?
 - Yes! I felt frustrated at a few of the plot twists and the shifts in tone/genre, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. It means I got invested in the story, and enjoyed it enough to care about finding what I felt needs some improvement or alterations.
- Grammatical view: most everything was on point, besides the rare typo. Sentences and phrasing were well-structured, the syntax was always there, and some conventions or rules were broken *well* - to either drive home a point or to emphasize a dramatic scene.

Off the top of my head, a good fiction book to follow dialogue conventions on would be *beachcombers* by Nancy Thayer, if only because she is consistent with grammatical framing devices in dialogue. Other masters of dialogue, particularly those who use complex phrases and sentences to frame it, would be J.K. Rowling, Stephen King, and Bret Easton Ellis. Here's a good article to use for reference as well:

<https://www.authorlearningcenter.com/writing/fiction/w/character-development/6491/8-essential-rules-for-punctuating-dialogue---article>

One of my pet peeves is the overuse of "just"...partly because I do it too. Using "just" just enough and it's pretty much unnoticeable...but more than a few times every page and it stands out more than it ought to. Here's a good article on alternative words and phrases:

<https://www.thesaurus.com/e/ways-to-say/words-to-use-instead-of-just/>

Also watch out for overusing these qualifiers: “really”, “only”, “pretty” and “actually”

Here’s an article on writing out numerals, specifically for height:

<https://www.deareditor.com/2012/04/re-writing-height-in-dialogue/>

I’m not an expert editor, so I can’t speak to numbers in temperature during the science scene, because I feel 64C reads better than sixty-four celsius, but I’d always lean toward typing out any number under 100 (one to ninety-nine).

As for the/The and W.X./W.X (used without a period at the end of a sentence as well) I’d pick one to use consistently, then go through the document and fix spots where the other is used. It’s not *that* noticeable except to anyone commenting/editing line-by-line, but it does stand out.

For flow, avoid using two verbs to accomplish one action. Such as “goes to dress up” or “gets to swim” -- use “dresses up” or “swims.” Another example was “doing experiments.” Unless padding for word count in an essay, using “experimenting.”

Opening Scene:

- Does the story begin with an interesting hook, creating a desire to read more?
 - Yes! In the comments I mentioned that the hook immediately captured my attention. It’s spooky, and sends shivers up my spine.
- Does the manuscript begin in the right place?
 - We learn who the character is, where the setting takes places, and are immediately introduced to the cast.

Characterization & Motivation:

First impressions of characters - Protagonist: Brielle; somewhat nervous, shy, and painfully aware of it. Cannot dance - Leading man: Caleb; strong, confident and caring - Friend: Mia; bouncy, talkative, maybe kind of crazy (prior to plot twist, definitely so now).

Caleb’s friend/foil: Elijah; stoic, coughs up some black ooze, not much beyond that

Professor Grey: a nice science professor.

Mama Dee: friend and peer of Karena (Brielle’s mother).

The secret W.X society new initiates: Aiden (second leading man, certainly a whole snack), Jamal (prankster, kind of goofy), Ebony (seems nice, nerdy), Alexandria (rude twin). W.X society: Neveah (initiation leader). Theodore Breaux (Karena’s boyfriend, Brielle’s father, Kinsley’s husband...reaaaalllyyy not aware), Kinsley (antagonist, scientist of some sort), Vivianne (Caleb’s sister, secretly working to fix W.X from within)

- Are the characters compelling, sympathetic, or someone you can root for?
 - Yes, and no. Brielle is sympathetic, but makes impulsive decisions that either could make her seem more human and therefore relatable...or difficult to like and root for. At times she’s logical and scientific, but then not so much.

We don’t know enough about most of the initiates, honestly, to feel either way for

any of them, except for Aiden, and sometimes Jamal, as an endearing guy who maybe needed more time being developed. I liked the nerdy description of Ebony, but didn't get much else from her character.

That being said, I care about what happens to most of the characters, so much so that I did get upset over Mia's plot twist. That's a sign of effective storytelling and characterization. If I want to figuratively toss a book across the room, or write an angry letter to the author, yet still keep on reading, I care enough to want to know what happens next.

- Do the characters feel real and three-dimensional, with distinct voices, flaws, and virtues?
 - Somewhat. I touched on earlier how Caleb has *some* complexities in that he is driven to find his sister, and even butt heads with the protagonist on how to navigate their situation near the end. However, he's also sometimes too much of a cardboard cut out of the "perfect" boyfriend: caring, but has his own interests and life, jealous enough to be cute about it but not too possessive, etc etc
- Are their goals clear and proactive enough to influence the plot (not passive)?
 - Yes, the characters influence the plot by being proactive and initiating action. They don't just *let* things happen to them and then react accordingly.
- Do their motivations seem believable, with well-drawn and appropriate emotion?
 - Yes, to all, except for the society members, whose motivations and emotions aren't touched on much.
- Are the secondary characters well-rounded and enhance the story rather than overwhelming the story or seeming like they should be cut?
 - The secondary characters, besides a few of the initiates and Mama Dee, don't do much to enhance the story except by filling out a body count
- Are the relationships between the characters believable and not contrived?
 - Yes and no. The relationship between Brielle and Mia was most disappointing. It felt like there would be a deeper bond between them as female friends. Unfortunately, the plot twist completely decimated where this could have gone. Ebony could, if fleshed out more and brought in more often, fill this role that I felt was missing in the character dynamics. Then, her memory erasure could be more devastating and appropriately distressing to the reader...and could even replace Brielle's memory wipe, which felt more a brief hindrance than anything the reader really worries about for her.
 - The relationship between Aiden and Brielle felt believable; though you can't help but root a bit more for Aiden than Caleb (sorry), as he's a more interesting and complex character, their warm friendship in the duende was realistic and highlighted something stories often miss: women can, indeed, have healthy and full friendships with men. Like in the comments I'd like to see this dynamic be shown through an event of some sort rather than being talked to about it by

Brielle.

Plot & Conflict:

- Are the internal and external conflicts well defined for each main character?
 - For Brielle and Caleb, yes. We know Brielle is motivated to find out more about her mother through attending her H.B.C.U and then later joining W.X as a legacy. The following conflicts that she goes through makes sense. Caleb is searching for answers about his sister, and Aiden wants to find out what happened to his girlfriend.
- Are the internal and external conflicts organic and believable, i.e. arising out of characterization and circumstance rather than feeling contrived or forced?
 - Yes and no. Out of circumstance, maybe, but each trial the initiates go through seems to be centered around advancing Brielle's narrative, without going much into the characterization of any of the other characters.
- Are there enough stakes and/or tension throughout to make it a "page turner"?
 - Yes. The scenes are climatic, with attention to dark scenery, weather, smells, sounds, and dark visuals that help give form to settings. The writing is quick and action-oriented, without much navel gazing or long winded ramblings in the narration to distract from the thrills.
- Does the premise avoid cliché and/or bring a fresh perspective to an old idea?
 - The setting itself does. While on-campus university, a more mature new adult iteration of the classic boarding school genre, fiction (particularly horror/thriller) is making a come back on the genre shelves, it'd be hard to find one featuring a BIPOC cast at a H.B.C.U. That in itself gives new breath to an old genre. And maybe that goes without saying.
- Are the plot twists believable yet unexpected?
 - Not exactly. There's some page-turning tension and buildup to them, which is appropriate for the genre, but the twist themselves fall flat because they pull the reader out of the narration by not explaining *how* these fantastical events work within an otherwise realistic setting. In an urban/modern fantasy setting, sure, the VR and memory wipe scenes make sense and add a sense of tension due to the actual physical/psychological danger, but otherwise there needs to be more build up to them throughout the narration for the reader to believe what's happening to be actually be reality within the scope of the setting.
- Do the characters act or react to events in a plausible, realistic, or believable way?
 - Yes. Brielle reacts like an actual human being, which is much appreciated in a genre full of main characters that often don't. An example is early on in the book, where Mia seemingly disappears and she *books it*, citing that someone's gotta survive to tell the story. This doesn't make her a coward; it makes her a smart and likable hero, especially given that she barely knows Mia at that point. Later, when they've gotten to be closer friends, she goes through torture to protect her (uh)

friend, fitting her personality and archetype.

Pacing:

- The pacing is appropriate for the genre. It doesn't go too slow nor does it skip over pertinent details like setting, time, place and characterization.

Setting & Worldbuilding:

- Are descriptions vivid and give a clear sense of time and place?
 - The setting at Williamson University is enhanced by the narrator providing details about the college campus, enough that it evokes nostalgia for anyone who has lived on campus. I'd even like more time spent exploring the campus and college town in which the story is set.

Dialogue:

- Is the dialogue natural and appropriate for the story, not stilted or overly narrative?
 - Yes, for the most part. Some of the dialogue goes on for an overly long paragraph, and needs to be broke up either with dialogue tags or by spacing down between a couple sentences like so:
“Something something and then something. Something something and then something. (leave out the quotation mark here)
(Continue with a leading quotation:) “Something something and then something. Something something and then something.....” J.R.R. Tolkien was a master at this, as his dialogue often went on for *pages*, and is a good reference
- Does dialogue move the story forward and reveal the characters?
 - Yes, especially for Mia, Brielle, Caleb and Aiden for the protagonists, then Kinsley and Theodore for the antagonists. By the end of it I was most attached to Mia as a character, actually, based solely on her interactions with Brielle.
- Are characters' voices consistent and distinct from one another?
 - Yes, for the most part. There could be a little more variation between the characters in W.X. There's a few moments where I couldn't care whether or not they made it through the initiation. Whether that was intentional or not, I don't know.
- Is there an appropriate mix of dialogue and narrative?
 - Yes. In some cases there needs to be more dialogue attributions to keep dialogue separate for the narrative: says, asks, replies, etc are a tiny bit *underused* in some spots, to where it gets confusing which of the cast is speaking when there's only narration around their dialogue to follow

Craft:

- Does the writing “show” the scene with the senses, using “telling” only as appropriate?
 - No, there are several scenes that could have been shown rather than told, where the narrator almost dives into a lecture at the audience (to put it bluntly).

Although I agree with everything she's saying, it could be evoked with a scene that *describes* the point.

- Does the writing quality allow the story to shine through and draw the reader in, or are flaws jarring or intrusive?
 - There are flaws, but they aren't too jarring except to anyone who's actively looking for them (i.e. me and other beta readers). The writing quality is deftly controlled and polished.
- Is the tone appropriate and consistent for the story?
 - Yup, it's perfect, especially in a first-person narrative
- Is the point of view (and any changes) handled appropriately and consistently?
 - The first-person present tense POV is very consistent

Additional Questions for Comment:

- Do any sections take you out of the story? (Mark in the manuscript)
 - Cont from page 106 commentary: The scene of being transported into a videogame was too much like reading a fantasy novel; it didn't fit the genre. If there had been more foreshadowing of this being a possibility for the club to execute, somehow, it would have fit, but should either be reworked to be more based in science than the supernatural, or have more scenes of that nature included throughout.
 - Cont from page 165 commentary: While the memory erasure is believable in the realm of a sci fi-y/supernatural thriller, it *still* doesn't make sense in context. Why erase her memories but let her keep the locket? When anyone with two synapses to rub together would check the locket for evidence of her birth parents. Also, are they assuming this would never come up in conversation between her and her adopted parents, friends, almost-boyfriend?

I'd either remove this altogether or include a conversation between the villains, perhaps overheard while she's coming in and out of consciousness, where they discuss these issues and how they plan to fix them or circumvent Brielle from very easily finding out, hey, my memories were erased (due to compelling evidence from those she loves around her) and going back to her mystery solving. This at least would keep the readers from wondering if the villains are too incredibly dumb to not simply off her in the first place (an easier thing to cover up than redirecting her memories)

- Who are your favorite—and least favorite—characters and why?
 - Mia, because she's confident and plain likeable. The plot twist *sort of* made sense, as they really were never super close, but her trying to stab people at the end was a little out of character, even as an "actress."
- What aspects are especially likable or unlikable about the protagonist(s)?

- As mentioned before, characterization for Brielle, Ebony, Caleb and Kinsley could be tightened and expanded upon, but none of them are particularly unlikable either way. Kinsley could be expanded on to be *more* unlikable or at least interesting beyond being a *b*.
- What three things worked best for you?
 - Personally, I'd like to see more experimenting and science, given the protagonist's major and background. Early in the story there's a scene where she's snuck into the lab and is experimenting on the black goo. *That* part captured my attention, and worked very well, and could potentially be used to into later parts of the story, either with the main characters or the villains.
 - The setting. The H.B.C.U and its secret society are very much the selling point.
- What three things worked least for you?
 - The cross genres. This is a thriller, and a school mystery...but is it also sci fi or fantasy? Or both? It could be both, but as it stands that doesn't work well for me.
 - The initiation trials. I found myself scrolling through them without much interest in the characters or the stakes. Some fleshing out of the initiates between each trial will help the reader care about what happens to them, instead of only Brielle.
 - Choices by the villain(s). She's crazy, but if she's a university-level scientists, and they're all the best of the best, why are certain choices being made? The society needs to be more sinister to the reader. I don't like gore or violence in general, but memory erasure? The black ooze was creepy. Less VR and Men in Black, more spooky oozy stuff.
 - Overall, if this is the first entry in a series, the society needs to be presented as more capable, daunting and powerful.