

Assessment of Manuscript

Dear [author],

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to beta read the first few chapters of your manuscript. In addition to leaving comments on the manuscript itself, I've included a summary of the major items I noticed as I was reviewing your manuscript.

I've tried to focus on areas of improvement that I feel would help the story the most, but as always, remember that my suggestions are just that--suggestions. Ultimately, this is your manuscript, and you know which suggested changes and revisions will be most beneficial.

Please don't hesitate to reach out if you have any questions or comments about my suggestions! I'm happy to clarify or give more details on any of these sections!

Thanks,
Kelly

Hook

The opening scene does a great job at building tension--the reader is immediately introduced to several mysteries that hint at future conflicts. The scene with Fenrick getting stuck in the mud is very effective at building the setting. Things like the stormy weather and Fenrick losing his glasses help build tension and danger for the scene. The reader is consistently given puzzle pieces to put together, and as one question is answered, another question is introduced. For example, as soon as the question of why Fenrick waits in the rain is (partially) answered, the mystery of who the travelers are and where they are coming from is introduced. This constant introduction of new conflicts and questions keeps the momentum of the story going and ensures the reader stays engaged.

My main suggestion for improvement here only applies if both of these sections (Fenrick's and Cecil's perspectives) are part of the prologue. If that is the case, it might be beneficial to cut down the prologue a bit to get to the main story sooner--just because 5000 words might be a little long for a YA prologue.

Worldbuilding/Setting

These opening chapters do an effective job at introducing the world and magic system without feeling too info-dump heavy for the reader. The reader only knows the bare basics of the magic system, which feels effective for the beginning of the story--at this point, the reader just needs to know that the magic system exists.

The story is firmly settled in the portal fantasy genre, and the mechanics of portal traveling are hinted at in an intriguing way. For example, the “price” that people have to pay when traveling through portals is a very interesting mechanic.

In addition, the differences between Cecil and Fenrick’s native world and the current world are fascinating. The reader is curious about the countries and dynamics of the native world as well as what the current world is like. Interestingly, despite being in the current world, the reader knows more about the native world--which I think is an effective way to get the reader to want to know more.

One thing to think about though is that this opening section doesn’t quite feel “YA” yet. Since the POV characters are a little older, this section feels a little more like adult fantasy as opposed to YA fantasy. That’s not necessarily a bad thing for the prologue, but since the prologue is so long some YA readers (although not all) might lose interest in the adult POVs.

Narration/Dialogue

The prose was solid and well written. Pacing was good, and there were some great descriptions sprinkled throughout. None of the narration or dialogue felt forced. Descriptions were effective at helping along the setting (hints at worldbuilding and magic system) and characterization (hints at personality and backstory).

I liked the introduction of a language barrier between Fenrick and Cecil--I think often portal worlds can skip over this mechanic (with auto-translation systems or things like that), but the inclusion of a language barrier helps the world feel more real. The dialogue showing Fenrick struggling with his once-native tongue does an effective job at converting this barrier.

One thing to consider is (as I mentioned before), the tone in this opening section feels a little more adult than YA. Again, that’s not necessarily a bad thing since it’s a prologue--it’s just something to think about.

Character

The characterization in this section is very effective. Fenrick’s character is particularly well fleshed-out--his appearance and mannerisms do a great job at portraying him as a slightly grumpy old man. Details like him losing his glasses, making this same trek every year for 30 years, getting his walking stick stuck in the mud, and having a bad leg do an effective job at showing that he’s older without having to explicitly state it for the reader. The details given about his background help the reader understand essential information about Fenrick and where he is from without getting bogged down in too many unnecessary details. The reader leaves the prologue curious about Fenrick’s backstory.

Cecil doesn’t feel as fleshed out as a character as Fenrick does at this point, but he is a sympathetic character for the reader. From Fenrick’s perspective, we get the sense that Cecil is

worried for the safety of his charges and suspicious of those around him. From Cecil's perspective, we understand that he is desperate to protect his nieces from some unknown (to the reader) danger and that he will soon lose all his memories. Since I haven't read the blurb, I'm not sure how much of a role Cecil plays in the rest of the story. Will there be other sections from his perspective?

Something else to think about is that having two different POVs in the prologue might feel a little long, especially for the YA genre. You could consider playing around with keeping the prologue entirely from Fenrick's perspective--but that's just something to think about.

Plot

As a reader, I feel like the plot feels action-packed and engaging. I felt interested the whole time, and there weren't any sections that dragged. If I picked this book up, these opening chapters would definitely hook me in to keep reading. In fact, I was a little disappointed that I didn't get to read the next couple chapters!

This opening section sets up a lot of potential conflicts that readers will be interested in exploring. Not only is there the main conflict that Cecil and the girls face (what are they running from and why?) but there are also smaller conflicts introduced (such as who Fenrick is, what the portal-traveling mechanics are like, what the magic system is like, what the differences are between the new world and the old world, etc.).