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Mr. Ken Follett
London, England

by fax: 011-44-171-352-5168

Dear Ken,

I now have read your synopsis for **OUT OF THE MOUTH OF THE DRAGON** twice, and I'm very happy with it. The plot and situation are unlike anything I've seen, full of clever and even ingenious twists; and the characters are good and getting better and better.

I have two general suggestions, and then a fair a number of detailed ones which relate only to particular points and particular scenes.

The first major comment has to do with the ending and/or chase. As you have it now, only about 10% of the story takes place after Judy and Jess know who one another are. You have enough good stuff here so that we don't need as extended a chase as you had in, say, **EYE OF THE NEEDLE** or **KEY TO REBECCA**; but I do feel that the novel would be even more exciting if you were to extend the cat and mouse stuff to about 25% of the book, perhaps as much as you had in **THE MAN FROM ST. PETERSBURG**. Also, I miss having these characters personally confront each other at or near the end. Sure, if they know little or nothing about each other, then it's perhaps best to skip over this; but if they do acquire some acquaintanceship, some beginnings of a personal drama between themselves, then I think having this would strengthen the ending.

My other major desire is to find a way to make this into more of a public drama. Sure, in the foreground we have these characters working against each other as you have them, but the reverberations of what Jess and his companions do don't seem, at least in this outline, pointed and dynamic enough. Maybe we need the Governor or maybe some casualties or relatives of casualties from Felicitas to get on John Truth's radio show and plead with the perpetrators not to do any more of this. Or maybe John Truth himself could read messages from listeners pleading for an end to the terror. As you have it, only the Governor and his assistant seem worried; and I think what's needed is some way to make it clear that a huge population is terrified.

Now I'll talk about chapters one by one.

One. We may need briefly to set this up in a prior scene with Star. How is he to pull this off? He's desperate? If you go about it this way, then at the outset, as soon as he's staring at the truck, we know what's at stake and the suspense begins to mount.

When he stares at this truck which he needs so badly, you might consider flashing back to the commune, letting us see it's beauty and serenity through Jess' eyes and then perhaps an awful daydream of the whole place being buried under an avalanche of water. You may think that's too graphic, maybe it is, but somehow we've got to make the reader understand Jess' motives and what's at stake for him.

When we get to Star asking Jess about Melanie, I wonder if we shouldn't have more than just a discussion about an offstage character. What if you give Jess a flashback or a memory scene, one in which we can experience his lust and craving for this young woman.

When you get to the actual writing, we'll need some explanation as to why Jess, who is part of the crew presumably, isn't going on with the crew to the next location.

Although Jess is our antagonist, I think he needs to be built in such a way that we keep some sympathy for him; and that means to me that he cannot callously kill Mario. I suggest you have Mario do something fearsome to provoke him. What if Mario confronts Jess about his disguise? Mario knows full well that Jess has made himself out to look Hispanic but he isn't, and as a result he has grown suspicious. Latins in my experience are hot-tempered and touchy; and Jess could say something which Mario misinterprets and it's Mario who attacks Jess; and then Jess who himself almost gets killed, manages to prevail and kills Mario. As I'm sure you'll recall, we've had similar killings in opening chapters of other of your books; and in every instance, they were necessary, desperate measures.

Two. A technical point. When a verdict is announced, a judge rarely gives a sentence. Usually that's done a day or a week or a month later.

I think that this courtroom also is a good place to introduce Bo, Judy's father. We then could have the sense almost as we meet her that he is her main pal and support.

I'm not sure that Los Angeles Detectives are allowed to have ponytails, but you can check into this.

Don Riley is, I agree, a useful character to have around; and I think it's good that he tells Judy to fight for her promotion, but if you're going to have him do this, then we also would enjoy knowing what is his agenda for himself.

At several points you bring in an FBI psycholinguistics expert, and given this ongoing role, I suggest that this character could be a friend and admirer of Judy, either male or female.

Three. This scene works so much better than your last version that I'm delighted with it. Still, I think it would be even better if while he and Melanie are arriving you could set up what he wants. After all, what happens if they should fail? That would set up what's at stake, what they're trying to do, the nature of the suspense; and we ought to know too what is on the disk he hopes to steal.

And what kind of daredevil adventures was he involved in twenty years ago which he gave up?

On the one hand you tell us that Melanie is a computer whiz and on the other that she is weak, needy and dependent. The way I see things, people who are a whiz at almost anything

acquire strength from this, authority, even power; and I wonder if you ought not to rethink her character and make her into someone who is in some respects at least more sure-footed.

On pages fourteen and fifteen you have two flashbacks, Jess recalling Melanie's telling him about her husband's work and Jess' recalling how he met Melanie; and it seems to me that these two should be combined rather than having two separate flashbacks a few pages apart.

On page fourteen you also mention that Michael is angry with Melanie for having gone on vacation four weeks ago and leaving only a perfunctory message, but elsewhere we have learned that she left Michael six months ago. During the preceding five months has she been living somewhere nearby and then suddenly she took off?

On page sixteen where we learn how Michael sets up his files, I think that ought to be part of the setup in the little scene between Jess and Melanie before they arrive. We need to know this stuff before Jess plunges ahead rather than afterwards.

Four. I found myself wondering if Judy would go calling on Michael or on anyone without calling first to see if he was home.

At the end of this scene you say that her main thought as she leaves is fear; but I think it would be better if she arrives with this fear. This should be what's driving her. Also, I think you need at the outset or almost at the outset to set up her attraction for him. There should be things he says and does which touch her and make her think that he's the kind of man she's always longed for but has so far never met.

Five. I have some doubts about Hippy Valley as a name for this commune, but more importantly it needs to be more, a lot more, than a cluster of log cabins in a clearing. After twenty-five years, I have to assume that the homes of these people are full of creature comforts, that the paths between them are lined with flowers and shrubs, that there are well-kept pens with chickens and maybe ducks. I was in Israel in April and spent some time at a kibbutz that has existed for almost fifty years; and although the homes were small and simple, you could see the attention and love that these people lavish on their environment.

And all this leads me to question whether indeed they would have no electricity and no tap water.

Next we come to the paradoxes of Baghrum, which I found to be interesting but which I doubt could have been conceived by someone who was illiterate.

And now you'll have to make some perhaps hard decisions about the commune itself. How many people does it contain? How many children? How many old-timers and how many new arrivals? If they've been there for twenty-five years, do some of them have grownup children? And these questions in turn will lead us to some decisions about what percentage of the commune members are actually involved with the earthquake plot.

It is in this chapter too that we particularly need a rich sense of the love Jess feels for some of these people. They are his family. And it might be good too for him to have an intense relationship with a particular spot where on a daily basis he likes to see the sun rise or set. Are there any rituals involving the whole commune which have deep meaning for him? And what are the particular and unique beauties of this place? You'll need stuff about the birds, trees, winemaking facilities, etc.

On page twenty-one you mention Melanie talking to the youngsters about fashions and cosmetics, but what I think might work better is that she brings with her a satellite dish and a TV. There hasn't been one here and this could mesmerize these kids like nothing else.

I'm a little puzzled by how Jess proposes "to strengthen the communal bonds."

You end the chapter with their meditating together. But could we have something rousing? Could they perhaps chant or sing? All through the chapter, we need a sense of how Jess needs these people, fears losing them, and it's this need and fear which should permeate.

Six. At the meeting in the State Capital, Judy gets put down; but it's not clear what she's fighting for. What specifically does she want from Cayron at this meeting? We also, I think, need some sense of what motivates Kincaid to behave in this way? What is his agenda? The normal bureaucratic procedure would be to not take a strong position in any direction and thereby "cover his ass." Kincaid by taking the position that he does must be after something for himself, but what?

Seven. OK, now the communards must prove themselves; but how many of them? Is everyone in the place involved? What about the kids, teenagers?

Eight. Again I find myself looking for a reason why Kincaid so dislikes Judy. Is it because she's a woman, an Asian, possibly a woman who has rejected him?

I think in this chapter too we ought to have a further development in Judy's attraction to Michael. Something he does should particularly touch her.

Nine. We also are going to need to keep track of what's going on in the commune in terms of their normal work. What is the time of year? Where are they in their tasks in the cycle of wine production? Are they busy weeding, spraying, watering, pruning, harvesting, pressing grapes, etc.? Is this going to be their last crop? We know the dam is coming, but have they been given a date by which they must vacate the premises? Maybe they had another property they hoped to move to, and the deal fell through.

Ten. Our analyst once again appears, and that reminded me that he or she could be a confidante and professional buddy to Judy.

Eleven. Someone in the story should be the *bete noir* for Jess and his communards. Is it the Governor, or should it be the person who dreamt up this dam and is the main force behind it? Or is the dam a brainchild of the Governor? We need to include such things as the name of the company which will get to sell the power, who is funding this dam, whether the money is being raised privately or through a public bond issue? In other words, we need a solid focus for the anger of the communards. But from the government's point-of-view, we also need to make it seem that building this dam and flooding this valley is not something that is merely capricious. Communities in the general vicinity may be suffering from power outages, and there could actually be some kind of a crying need for more electricity. Maybe hospitals with operating rooms aren't getting air conditioning, bright lights, etc. So, from the point-of-view of the Governor, it's not only that he doesn't want to cave into terrorists, but this dam is necessary.

Towards the bottom of page twenty-eight you toss in the fact that our communards have a "religious philosophy." If that's the case, and frankly it's something I think could add to the book, then this needs to be woven through.

Twelve. Michael's mother here plays a crucial function; and in order for this to work, we need to bring her into the story earlier. What if she is a record dealer or collector specializing in sixties music? And in fact, that could be one of the things which draws Judy and Michael together, a shared interest in some particular musical group that played in the sixties. Maybe Michael has a big collection of old 33s which play incessantly in his place, and these songs are also some of Judy's favorites?

Thirteen. If stories about the seismic vibrator are not only in the newspapers but on television, and the kids at the commune see this, that could create an interesting complication.

Fourteen. Yes, Judy of course must make love with Michael; but we need to build to this; and it's not clear yet what the intermediate steps are.

Fifteen. I had the feeling that Jess and Melanie found the carnival ride a little too quickly and too conveniently. On the other hand, wouldn't they need to think about disguising this vibrator soon after they steal it? It's valuable and there should be an alert out for it. So, they might start much sooner in the story looking for ways to disguise it; and maybe quite a few chapters earlier, after much searching, they find this old carnival ride. Only now, at this stage, maybe they repaint it and dress up the old panels, and maybe even try to make the thing function as a carnival ride.

Sixteen. Again I find myself wondering about Jess' religiosity. If he tells his colleagues that this destruction was the will of God, I wonder how this fits into the framework of his and their lives.

Seventeen. In just about every sentence you have put down for this chapter, some major mystery suddenly is cleared up. It could be that in the text of the book, these will be spaced out and Judy and Bo will struggle quite a bit to come up with these answers; but as you have it in the outline, all this seems to me to be too quick and too convenient.

Eighteen. I liked Jess' renting a car, a helicopter and two actors; but I think we need to make more of money as an issue earlier in the novel and of course establish definitively that he is the treasurer and caretaker of the commune's funds. In fact, maybe one of the things he's done as their leader is to invest their money astutely so that they have quite a respectable net worth.

I have to assume in chapter sixteen that Jess would have set up conditions about this meeting which would have served to protect himself or which at least have had the appearance of doing that. He is no naive person; and so that when he is betrayed, I find it hard to believe that he would be quite so surprised. Angry yes; but does he want to kill everyone in San Francisco; or does he want to save the commune? You have him sort of slip over the edge into semi-insanity; and to me that makes him less interesting.

Twenty. I'm puzzled about Melanie's phone calls. If Michael is arrested, then presumably he is not at his home, so where is she telephoning?

Does he need to kill Melanie?

Judy and Michael arrive; but it's not clear to me how they know exactly where to go. Even if Melanie says Daly City, that's not exactly a tiny place. And do we need the FBI? I would rather see Bo and Cayron at this finale.

And that takes me to the end of this story which despite all these comments and suggestions, I think is wonderful.

One final thought. Could Michael and/or Judy have a connection with someone who died Felicitas? In other words, I'd like to see what they're trying to do be not only to save humanity, as it were, but for there to be a personal component of grief and hurt.

I'll be eager to hear what you think of all this.

Warm wishes,
Al

P.S. Separately I'm mailing you back the outline with my markings which may also be of some help. I'm here through this week if you'd like to talk and return from France on June 29th.