



ANN PATTY
VICE PRESIDENT
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

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Dear Ken,

I think this book is going to be great; the first hundred pages or so seem already to be more full and polished than your other first drafts; they read more like a second or third draft, which thrilled me, and bodes well. After that I think some of the character issues arise—note I say *character* issues and not *plot* issues because I feel like the plot is well in hand—but I do have some concerns about characters, foremost among them Melanie, and, if it can be called a character, the commune.

Melanie's motivation still just doesn't make sense to me; who she is and what she's after is not clear; why she goes along with the plot still doesn't seem explained. Ostensibly, she's motivated by her son and his allergies and wanting to find a safe place for him, but we don't see her acting throughout the book as that kind of a mother, as a mother whose be-all and end-all is her son's welfare. Nor do we see her as quite deranged enough to do what she does. Nor do we see her tie to Priest being so strong that she seems in his thrall. Nor do I understand why an almost-Ph.D. seismologist, beautiful, sexy, intelligent and trained, wants suddenly to live in a commune with with a bunch of old hippies. I have various suggestions and ideas, but I think that character will take much of our discussion time when we meet.

I also have some problems with Priest and with Star, some of which are more about hippie lingo and the way hippies transmogrify into cultists in older age. The language is something I can help you with in the line editing since I lived in California in the '60s and '70s and I know how people talked. However, more fine tuning needs to be done on the nature of the commune. Right now it feels like a late '60s, early '70s vision transplanted into the '90s, rather than evolved over time into the '90s. Pieces I've read about communes that have lasted this long portray a different reality—especially in regards to possessions, technology, work, etc. We should discuss this in depth. If Priest is the Luddite he appears to be, we need to have more of a feel for his evolution. His feeling "at home and safe" there is not enough.

I also still have doubts about Priest's illiteracy. I know why you need it for the plot, but it doesn't seem entirely credible to me given his intelligence, accomplishments, and manipulative capabilities. It's hard for me to believe that he wouldn't have learned some of the rudiments of reading, unless, of course, he has a disability as well, say major dyslexia. But I don't know what implications that would have for the business he had run when he became successful. And he couldn't get a driver's license without taking a written test. And how can he manage the bank account? I imagine that you've researched this as you always do and have a handle on it; it's not something that I think ruins the book, but it still doesn't ring completely authentic to me.

I'll go through as usual, page by page, bringing up any questions I have. Once again, I'm only stressing the negative here, not the positive, and I do think, comparing this both to A PLACE CALLED FREEDOM and THE THIRD TWIN, that you're much farther ahead of the game in this draft than you have been at this point with the other books, because I know how much fuller and more polished you make everything on the second go-round.

page 6:

What I think of as the prologue, which also refers to the epilogue. Part of me really likes this way of beginning and ending, and part of me questions it; I'm not even sure why. Let's discuss.

page 15:

Perhaps Star's record should have made her famous for fifteen minutes (a la Nico?), given how many people call in about it. Maybe there should have been at least one cut from it that really became something of an anthem. I think that would build up the credibility of that piece of the plot.

page 19:

The messianic zeal implied by Star's rap here doesn't really get picked up. She implies both that they're looking to show the way to the rest of the world, and that they're just looking to hide out from the world. You need to explore which way to go here.

page 21:

First characterization of Melanie as checked, and yet this doesn't jibe with her marriage to Michael and having Dusty at a relatively young age, or with her life previous to breaking up with Michael. Perhaps her bringing up the earthquake is the need to impress, the need to belong. Maybe there's a lot more desperation in her actions than are characterized now.

page 36:

I don't know if you meditate, but your techniques are different from mine. We'll compare. Also, is this a real mantra? It doesn't sound like one to me,

and it should probably be authentic—some real Sanskrit words of some sort—and shouldn't the entire commune use the same mantra?

page 44:

How can a person get a driver's license if they don't know how to read? You have to pass a written test in America.

page 62:

Isn't pancreatic cancer incurable? And untreatable? I might be wrong, but that's what I thought.

page 65:

I'd like to see Judy have a few more thoughts about LeStrange and his cancer so that she comes off as a little more sympathetic. After all, the guy was her mentor.

page 71:

The Simon Sparrow character and all his voice analysis I find extremely fascinating. A simple usage term: people aren't referred to in America as the state governor; they're just referred to as the governor. So in all the dialogue, it would just be "the governor" rather than "the state governor" (cf. page 77). Also, I'm not sure the term "Cabinet Secretary" is used at the state government level. We should check this.

page 78:

Another insignificant detail, but screensavers always have to be in constant motion, so this would have to morph into something else.

page 81:

Re: the dog allergy. That's not enough—it doesn't matter where the dog sleeps, it's the saliva in the dander. Since a cat sets him off later, this is a medical inconsistency.

p. 84:

I think we need a whole lot more here on why Melanie left Michael. She's got to have some deeper pathology; otherwise her actions are hard to figure.

page 91:

This mantra sounds too much like a parody.

page 96:

Anyone who grows up in California has been in more than one earthquake. They may have been in only one major earthquake where it caused real damage, but there are tremors all the time.

page 103:

This is a pretty heavy statement about the morality of the San Francisco Police Department.

page 146:

Bones' arrival on the scene with his circus truck seems just a little too convenient here; I can feel the wheels of the plot turning a little too obviously. I wonder if Bones couldn't perhaps already be in residence with the carnival truck and use it as an outside source of income. Or maybe he makes a frequent trips rather than not having been seen for twenty years.

page 155:

I'm not sure why Priest thinks that his or Melanie's voice might be recognizable.

page 157:

You might mention what the plan is for Dusty. Also, once again, if Melanie's motivation is all around Dusty, it's hard for me to believe that she's put herself in such danger to be around an earthquake with him elsewhere.

page 180:

How did Dusty get with his dad? Did they drop him off there before they caused the earthquake, rather than leaving him at the commune? (It would be out of the way.) This needs to be clarified.

page 190:

Wouldn't they think immediately about Star's going to pick up Flower and their meeting with the police just the other day?

page 190 and following:

It would seem that this might get bigger play on the news, since people in California are so terrified of earthquakes. You may have researched this and found out otherwise; but it seems like the kind of thing tabloid television would jump all over immediately.

page 224–225:

I wonder if this scene should take place earlier, when Melanie first decides to join in on Priest's scheme. Also, as before, I just don't think the motivation is strong enough for Melanie. There's got to be something else, whether it be revenge on Michael, professional competition, which might fit in somewhere—something bigger. Also, this is the first scene we've seen since Melanie kicked Star out of bed—it seems to me we need a little more transition; otherwise that episode never gets dealt with. After that episode, wouldn't Melanie be more unbalanced and wary? Something would need to take place to keep her on track with them if she suddenly sees that they're freaks that she doesn't want to be part of.

page 230:

I found myself wondering here if the commune joined up at all with Los Alamos to protest the dam, or if the dam doesn't affect the Los Alamos property. Certainly they would know about one another, and certainly on page 234 the Feds would have found out about the existence of a commune when they were at Los Alamos. It seems to me the relationship between Los Alamos and the commune and where they sit on the dam project needs to be dealt with also.

page 250:

I was surprised to see Melanie here when we just saw her up at the commune.

page 272:

Certainly by now they'd have a dedicated 800 phone number for the case.

I wonder if around and about Chapter 13, if the state of California wouldn't be getting pretty flipped out about this and if you might need to widen the lens of the book here and there to show things that are going on in the larger world in response to this threat.

page 276:

It seems to me that Melanie might probe a little more deeply with Priest here, especially since his real name and his record would come out. Wouldn't she begin to get flipped out at this point?

page 284:

Priest and Melanie's realization that Michael is hanging out with the FBI agent in charge of this case has to spook them more. Or, Priest has to somehow think that they're playing right into his hands. Whatever their reaction is to this news, it seems much too mild as is. It's got to be made much more of an issue, perhaps Priest grasping it to show that the forces of the universe are in tune and helping everything fall into his hands. Also, the romantic complications on all four sides are great fuel for emotional turmoil. More could be made of it.

page 287:

Here, too, I just don't think Melanie's motivation is strong enough. There has to be more than just Dusty. After all, she could move to a plot nearby in the mountains. She didn't have to be in this commune. It would be good if Melanie felt that somehow she was competing with Agent Judy Maddox vis a vis Michael and Dusty—that would create even further dramatic tension between the characters.

page 296:

It seems to me Priest's list of motivations here should include a foolhardiness and a drive for power. At this point Priest's desire to save the commune should also start to fuel an almost maniacal power drive.

page 304:

At this point, where they've got Star, Ricky Granger and Flower all identified in one way or another, wouldn't Flower's arrest a couple of weeks ago and Star's coming to pick her up show up in the database? I'm not sure about this; I bring it up just in case. Also, where did they get photos of the young Stella Higgins?

page 306:

This scene with Judy jumping in on Michael and Melanie feels over the top to me. I know it's dramatic, but it feels awfully forced, especially since it's never really dealt with later. Let's discuss.

page 308:

Here, too, wouldn't he think about Flower's arrest the previous week?

page 309:

Also, now that Priest has tasted high power and tense action, isn't he maybe coming to enjoy it?

page 326:

Suddenly Michael is part of the team—how did this happen? Also, we need some followup on Judy's busting in on the scene with Melanie, if that's kept in. Wouldn't Judy have to go through some kind of accreditation plan to have Michael set up in her shop?

page 328:

I think the situation described here needs to be dramatized.

page 332–333:

Star's hippie rap here seems pretty silly and unbelievable.

page 339:

It seems unlikely to me that Michael would be in the helicopter with Judy, especially if he needs to be looking at the seismograph.

page 349:

Michael earlier went and got Dusty out of Priest's car; wouldn't he recognize this car description? Also, I wonder where Dusty is while Michael is working. Is he back at the commune? Also, wouldn't the FBI have a description of Melanie as well?

page 352:

Here again I can't believe that Michael would be in the helicopter and on the scene during the showdown. Couldn't he identify Melanie later?

page 360:

At this point, Michael would be completely freaking out about Dusty and Melanie. He's got to be in a state of absolute terror about his son.

page 361:

His apology to her should have come much earlier; he's got much bigger issues on his mind now, like the safety of his son. Also, why are they letting Michael be a part of all these operations? Isn't his role as a seismologist? Wouldn't they be afraid to let him in because of the personal conflict of interest that would be possible?

page 371 and following:

I can't figure out why most of Chapter 17 is here. Is it to have a face-to-face confrontation? It's hard for me to believe that under any circumstances Priest would show up in Sacramento knowing how much manpower was arrayed against him at this point. I just can't believe he'd take the chance of appearing at a press conference.

page 384:

I don't get this either; they already had the picture of Stella Huggins before they located a copy of her record. I don't know why the copy of the record makes such a change at this point. Perhaps I'm missing something about where they got the picture of her on page 304.

page 394:

Would they really let Michael go on the raid with him, given the personal connection? *He can see the fault line from the air.*

Chapter 19:

At this point it seems to me that Priest knows he's lost, and the earthquake he's setting is only for vengeance, and that Melanie knows that, too. This has implications for both their characterizations, as previously.

page 424:

It wouldn't be too easy for the parents to drive from Stockton to Berkeley and get back to Stockton given the traffic, would it?

page 433:

I think the instructions here should be a lot more detailed, so that it really feels like they're preparing the people of California for an earthquake, and once again, he might give us a sense of how the larger country is reacting to

this. You could create a scene here reminiscent of the old nuclear drills—freak the readers out completely—let's discuss.

page 445:

Here again, would Michael really be on the scene along with Judy? Hard to believe.

I'm sending along a copy of the manuscript with a few references to this letter. Look forward to seeing you at 10 a.m. on the 19th.

All best,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, stylized loop followed by a horizontal line extending to the right.

AP:ps