

Writers House

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By Fax & Email

Mr. Ken Follett
England

Dear Ken,

As we discussed, I think you are in very good shape with this new book of yours. I have already couriered the manuscript to you with some marginal markings all of which I hope will be self-explanatory. As usual, they ask for clarification, they call for you to punctuate emotion, they call in question details which contradict other details, all pretty small stuff.

The job ahead, as I see it, is primarily to enrich your major characters and deepen our involvement with them.

Flick would be more interesting and more unique if she had some particular quirk, eccentricity or interest. I came up with three possibilities for this, but as often happens, you may come up with a better one.

She could be a bird lover and a bird watcher. Along with all her other equipment, she might carry some bird seed in one of her pockets and a pair of binoculars, and a tiny notepad on which she records sightings of unusual and wonderful birds. She might even be expert at certain birdcalls which she could use as signals. Another possibility might be her Moliere thesis. She might be lugging along some tome from which she might be taking notes, then perhaps darting into a library or archive in Reims looking for records or ancient newspaper clippings about Moliere performances in that city. The war and her mission notwithstanding she could also, from time to time, be sneaking odd moments to complete her thesis. My last idea along these lines would be to make her some kind of automobile fanatic. She could know all about the capabilities of every vehicle they encounter, know something about their weaknesses, their unusual strengths, how most easily to start them, to break into them, to repair them, etc...

I had questions too about how you present her love life. I found it odd that a woman who is so daring and dynamic and decisive should have gone through university without having had a single love affair. Back when she decided to go after Michel, it was not clear to me what it was about him that so totally entranced her and drove her to want to marry him. We need perhaps a paragraph of something he said or did that just blew her away and then in the present action at least a glimmer of what that was. We may have a similar problem, I feel, with her falling for Paul. But I think you'll find that I've dealt with that when we get to my paragraph about Paul.

To warm her up a bit more, I would emphasize more strongly that she adores Percy; and then when Ruby comes on, I suggest that you make it clear how much she trusts and values Ruby and how grateful she is to have Ruby along. Also, in the midst of the high tension, even when she's waiting in dire peril, it might be good to bring in a thought or two about her mother and about Mark.

Finally, you establish her as in a sense the Queen of the Agents, the most successful operative in the SOE, but there is no mention of any previous mission on which she did something altogether extraordinary. Somewhere towards the end, we get a short list of the people she has killed; but that isn't quite the same. I think you would do a lot to enhance her stature if early in the novel, we learned about some particular feat of hers which has become legendary.

Dieter is 100% better than how you conceived of him in the outline, but I think it's possible to make him even more interesting. Let's assume that Stephanie is something of a voluptuary, a woman who is mad for him and mad for his body. She, as you have her, is chic, fashion-conscious, but she could be more than just a milliner. Why not make her, say, a music or movie critic, someone with a cultivated mind. Dieter's wife by contrast would be a young woman from his childhood neighborhood, with only a high school education, a girl from a religious background who is eager to please her husband in every way but who in her heart of hearts would just as well avoid having sex. She wears a minimum of makeup and frowns on sexy clothing, in short, she's a model German housefrau, loves to cook, clean, look after the children and that's about it. Dieter

admires these traits in her and feels grateful for all that she does and wants to do for him; and as a result, some of the time, he's wracked with guilt because of his addiction to Stephanie. He sees the solution to his dilemma in a German victory. That way, he could spend a good part of his life in France and keep Stephanie. With Stephanie being part Jewish, he knows that he could never bring her back to Germany (at least under Hitler), and he could also be slightly fearful that he might be disgraced if it were discovered that he was so deeply involved with even a part Jewess.

As you have it, we don't learn about the depth of his feeling for Stephanie until quite near to the end of book. What I suggest is that we learn from his thoughts that he's smitten as soon as we meet him, but he also may wish not to reveal this to Stephanie. But she recognizes and knows of his feelings even though he doesn't verbalize them.

I think he needs a clear-cut job. As you have it, his responsibilities appear to be a bit vague and amorphous. Okay, he's acting as an intelligence operative for Rommel, but what is his specific brief? My sense is that you can establish that Rommel has a half a dozen people doing work like Dieter's, and that he is the counter-intelligence officer in charge of a specific territory, five or ten or fifteen departments in this area of France. He, I imagine, would also have clear cut subject areas of responsibility i.e. communications, transportation, and maybe even logistics such as seeing to it that enough grain, milk and even wine from this part of France gets to the troops at the front.

In Dieter's scene with Rommel, he gets praise for something he did in North Africa but that too is vague. Then later in the book you mention the disaster at Alam Halfa (shades of THE KEY TO REBECCA!) But what if in that instance, Dieter had delivered the correct intelligence but Rommel mistakenly took the bad advice from someone else.

Small points. Hans is a useful assistant, but we would give Dieter even more stature if we knew that Hans worships the ground on which Dieter walks. Dieter should be like a God to him, not just a superior officer. We also never get a glimpse of Dieter in his full uniformed splendor. At the opening we see him in an elegant business suit, but I imagine him an imposing figure, the kind of official to whom people almost automatically bow and scrape, and I would try if possible to bring this in.

Paul we first meet as a junior assistant to Monty; but then he takes on some importance as the "Manager" of Flick's mission. But do we see him doing any managing? He seems to float around without any essential role. One solution might be that his job is to obtain the stuff Flick and her women need for this mission and this stuff is terribly hard to get. First there is a ton of red tape to get through, and second the stuff is in extremely short supply and there's great competition for it. One item could be the forged passes for the cleaners. Another could be an airplane large enough to accommodate this group with a pilot who is ready and able to make this flight. Maybe he can't find the right guns, the right hand grenades, the right detonators. You could use any one of these things or all of them. But then we could see him wheeling and dealing,

maybe creating subterfuges, maybe lying, but in the end getting everything that's essential.

Then there's the issue of what is so wonderful about him that Flick goes head over heels. One approach might be that he is sensitive to her in ways that no other man ever has been. He instinctively knows when she's up, down, hungry, tired, thirsty, feeling sensuous, feeling cool. I suggest that you work into one of their scenes a situation in which she's feeling one way and acting another, and he pierces right through to what's going on inside of her. Of course he does it in a warm and sympathetic way. You make it clear that she is both shocked and delighted that he seems to understand her so well.

Earlier I mentioned the need to bring in some major exploit of hers; and we might do this perhaps in a scene between Percy and Paul; and Paul could be blown away by what Percy has to tell him. You also could establish that they have similar interests, whether it be birds, Moliere or cars; and if it's not too much of cliché they might even love the same music. Her one bit of serious resistance to him (in addition to her being married to Michel) might be some hesitation about wanting to go off to live in America.

Now for some smaller non-character points.

Everyone in the novel is hopping in and out of cars and other motor vehicles as if there's no shortage of gasoline in occupied France in 1944. My sense is that even for the Germans, this was in very short supply. So, you might want to work into the plot some

additional complications because petrol just isn't available for this or that automobile. And secondarily, no one appears to be hungry. All the cafes seem to have food, the bakeries to have bread, etc... We could have situations when one or another of your characters go to a café, where they conceivably could be told that there is no food available or nothing but yesterday's bread.

I have reservations about the title but I expect that you and Phyllis will come up with a stronger one. I also wonder about Dieter's frequent use of the word, "jackdaws." It doesn't feel right to me that he would so easily pick up this word and use it so constantly.

As we briefly discussed on the phone, I think it would be good once or twice in the novel to bring in the larger world. A line for example about news on the Russian front, news about the American election, news about the war in the Pacific or the war in Italy.

The action of the story is taking place in a somewhat devastated world, but the only time I had a real sense of this was on the train to Reims when you had workers repairing the bombed-out tracks. I spent the year 1951 – 1952 in France; and my recollection is that all urban centers, places with factories, railroad yards, railroad-switching junctions were still surrounded by devastation and rubble. By June of 1944, the German air force, I believe, no longer was doing much bombing in Britain, but there was heavy damage all over London (and other parts of England) from the Luftwaffe, and

as I recall there were U-2 rockets during that period flying over the Channel and causing damage to selected areas. I'm not suggesting that you dwell on this, but it should be mentioned in passing, noticed sadly by Flick and possibly by Paul and maybe even by Dieter.

I'll look forward to our digging into all this a bit more on March 12th; and Claire and I and Amy and Dan would love to organize a nice lunch or dinner. So, just let us know when would be a good time. Monday nights, I have a regular tennis game, doubles, and usually one person can't make it, so you might want to play tennis with us that night.

Warmly,
(sent electronically)
Al

cc. Amy Berkower

PS Warm Regards to Barbara.