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BERNADETTE GRIMMETT

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Bernadette.

Just got done with your latest chapters. We return!

I hope the COVID spells the right kind of space and time for you to dedicate to your project. This thing has traveled a lot of miles, and hark, doesn't there be a fair few more to go :)

I went back and re-read chapters 1-5 just to remind myself of several characters, several plotlines, particularly the outskirts stuff, the historical stuff. Severus and Julia and Plautus. Also to see where Proculus stood in the family, age and discipline and all this.

If I were to summarize where things are at, Nerysa's Christian goodness has spawned an orphanage that is maybe more successful than she'd anticipated, Marilla continues correspondence with friend Julia who is abroad with her husband, Emperor Severus, and has had her children moved into positions of royalty should the embattled Emperor fall (of course, the snake Plautus remains, so who's to say (except history) how secure that footing is), Demetrius has finally been moved to bring in the sheep he never wanted, and in doing so, liberated Polybius to a life as a house-owner and husband to poor Julia2, who is having a hard time giving him kiddos. He won't take an orphan. He has always been a bit grasping. (Or more than a bit). Lucillus is off-screen, living his invalid lifestyle, the strong, sick brother, and the next generation are showing their colors, Proculus and Marcus taking jabs at each other, one for the other's physical qualities, the other for the other's social qualities.

Other small details spring to mind as intriguing: Publius rising in the ranks, distant; Proculus' coming of age as a true shepherd with the full weight of that responsibility.

In all: the world continues, ever growing, like a well-attended bubble that is blown onto a collection of bubbles.

Your attention to detail remains absolutely gold. The byres, the financial logis-

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tics, the knowledge of husbandry, the herbs, locations, etc—this is very much a real world, and you’ve made it so. Way to keep after it. I never feel as though I’m not learning something when I’m reading your work, and I think that’s a tribute to how much learning *-you’ve-* done. That or you’re a damn good liar and make-up artist. But I suspect the former.

None of the plot feels forced, and knowing this is as large a work as it is, I’m comfortable with the pacing which is methodical enough & steady enough to walk through the freeing of ‘minor’ characters, the caring for individual sheep, the swaddling of anonymous infants. As before, you make a *-household-* of your work, rather than a study of a character. Hell, I could say you make an *estate* of it, a community, as it seems that a new building or a new venture pops up every fifty pages, and new servants and hands with particular knowledge spring up to bring this family along.

Demetrius remains distant through these pages, maintaining his chokehold on the finances and logistics of running a successful farm. I see challenge for him in taking to his (unruly?) son as possible expansion. The boy is like a colt, bucking as he is. Lucillus was put down with disease and became a fascinating and bent character; curious to watch Proc’s rise and eventual shape. Not that every character needs breaking. But I certainly was broken in my smaller and larger ways, and it has made me both better at some things, and avoidant of others. This sheep’s death was moving—probably the most moving scene of the work so far. I wonder if it was moving for me because it was a sheep and innocent as sheep are, or if Proculus’ tears were mine. No answer to that, not yet. Let’s see if it affects him.

Lepidina is absent of character. She is young though, I imagine? I look forward to knowing her.

I come to think that some of *100 Years of Solitude* reigns in this book. Not in its delivery, but in its movement through time, and through names.

Let’s see. Notes outside those I’ve left dotting the text:

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Indents and so forth: I'm not sure if its how we transfer files or if you haven't really bothered to make sure that, in a rough draft, they match up, but I started marking up which paragraphs were indented proper and which were left un-indented, for steadiness of read. If it doesn't bother you, that's fine; obviously when it goes to print or its next stage, those'll need to be ironed so I just alerted through the first half or so of the pages. It's nothing personal there; I just think cleanliness of the matter of the work can make the stuff it means clean too.

Ah: returning to an older idea, and one that's tied to your questions about chapter length. Pacing. I do think certain points are due a bit of stretching. And it's mostly dialogue where I see these points. You tend to move through several pivot points in dialogue during a character's speech; they might be going one direction and then suddenly there's an 'oh but it is hard isn't it,' or similar, and suddenly we're moving in another direction. I do think that in those moments, a bit of character positioning, physical gesture, adjustment, would really help slow the reader and allow their mind to see the adjustment. Easy enough to watch people in video chats or whatnot scratch their heads when a particular turn of thought takes them elsewhere, or slow their thoughts by picking at a tooth, or making a dramatic proposition more dramatic by turning to look at something else in the room and then looking back. Some of these motions are indeliberate, but there is so much conversation done in gesture, and you are already proven at delivering good conversation in speech. I've marked up a fair number of them so I won't provide explicit examples here.

One suggestion that I use in my own writing, is when a character would make a face, make the face yourself; pull your cheeks in, lift them towards your eyes, bare just your lower teeth, suck the saliva from between your teeth and make a slight squirrel noise: there's so many things to do. Even the scratch of the nose, the pinch of the nostrils, need not signify smell, but can just be 'change', can be emphasis, and can provide enough delay to sell a scene as dramatic without the drip of blood or the heavy sigh.

Similarly, thinking of stretching. I'm thinking of the scene in which P, M, and L are on the hill before they go find the underground frescoes: there is some language there that essentially says 'it was a slow day on the hill. PM and L all

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went for a wander'. I think you should take that moment and the feeling of that scene and enjoy it a bit more, and more to the point, I think if the scene suggests something, some mood or feeling (despondency, overwhelm, excitement), the shape of the text should aid it. So, in that case, as I wrote in my line notes, if the day is heated and slow and everyone is falling asleep, take your time with it. Bake the thing in sun. Let the bottle of wine warm. See the myriad of insects that leap up and over everyone's legs as first one character and then another fall asleep. The tutor tries, but even he can't get a lesson going. Then when the kids go awandering, we have been somewhere and *\*felt\** the languor, rather than just simply been told: here is where they started, and here is where they went.

I think this notion of the shape of text is something the poet often gets taught but us prosies don't get as cleanly. If two characters are arguing hotly, how do we make the shape of the text look hot, back and forth, tit and tat, yip and yap, no yes no yes. Do we smash it all together as someone gets angry enough to scream. Do we split it apart when someone is slow to come to their apology?

Yes and yes and yes.

Work the words as much as what they mean. This isn't easy and doesn't always come across, but I think it's some advanced stuff to keep in your thought process. I'll try to make specific examples obvious as they come to me.

Let's see. What else.

Short answer to your chapter length thing: the letters are perfectly long as chapters go. That's fine.

The scene with Polybius being freed does lack opposition or suspense: will Demetrius accept. Instead its simply there to see: 'here is what Polybius got from Demetrius'. We don't need for there to be an argument, but stay there a little longer. Give us some things to wonder about, rather than just handing us freedom, and a new place on the estate. I think that's a critical part of any 'section', even in 'set up' sections, wherein nothing is to be 'gained' or lost. I think your sequence with Nerysa, and the one with the sheep's death are flawless in

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this particular manner, because each has something to be considered and decided upon.

The letters, well, they tend to connect to one another by dint of their form, and because they lack character-to-character action, all of their ‘possibilities’ or things to wonder at are naturally hypothetical, ethereal, one-sided, and exist as the threat of potential danger, or the threat of potential ignorance (If I write you about the health of my family, it is a limited perspective—they could be dying—and the Reader’s suspense is: is this character right in what they say or suppose? Will the snake take the throne? Will Julia’s optimism be evaporated by actual events rather than her perceived viewpoint on these events?). Thus, they work without reconsidering. The Polybius scene is a touch soft in this manner.

But in all, the section breaks are as they should be, and I did not want much.

Dot dot dot.

Aside that, Bernadette, it’s good to be back, thinking this way.

Thanks, as usual, for filling me in on a world, time, that I did not know. Perpetually enlightening.

Carry on!

-ew