

The Names We Take

Trace Kerr

Developmental Editorial Letter

Dear Trace:

On behalf of Ooligan's editorial department, I'd like to thank you for giving us the opportunity to work with you on *The Names We Take*. Diving into the world of dystopian Spokane has been an incredible adventure, and we are all so excited to see where the manuscript goes from here. Pip's story most certainly needs to be told, and we are honored to help you share it with the world.

This editorial letter will function similarly to those you've previously received from the acquisitions department. Our feedback is divided into three broad categories and numerous sub-categories, and touches on everything from specific characters' motivations to more general questions of verisimilitude. At the end of the letter, you'll find suggestions for how to tackle the revisions, as well as some recommended media that we hope you'll find interesting and inspiring.

Narrative

Worldbuilding

The book paints a vivid picture of dystopian Spokane, but the question of what the world looks like one year after losing 80 percent of the population is a huge one to tackle. Although the bones of the world are good, some of the details don't come across as fully developed. For example, Spokane has a thriving community of formerly homeless people, some gangs of ne'er-do-wells, and a lot of orphaned children running around, but other than that, it's a ghost town. Assuming 80 percent of the population died from One Mile Cough, that still leaves 55,000 people in the city. Where did they all go? How did they attempt to rebuild in the wake of this huge tragedy? What does their society look like now? How have they formed new communities? It's a big question, and not an easy one to answer.

One fix might be to have the virus kill off more people. If only two percent of the population survived, suddenly you're down to a few thousand people. That would help explain Spokane's empty streets and the feeling of lawlessness.

In addition to having more people die from the virus, consider establishing a few functioning, lawful communities that Pip is aware of. Even with these pockets of civilization, it makes sense for Pip to prefer living separately, with Whistler—she wasn't accepted before the collapse of society, so why would she be accepted after? Creating a sense of normalcy or order in the midst of the chaos would help flesh out this world. Pip identifies Navy and company as traders at the beginning of the book, so she's clearly aware of the existence of groups of people who do not necessarily mean harm to all outsiders, but we never see her interact with or think about those people.

Something else to think about: with so many people gone, surely animal populations would have rebounded? Consider adding more animals to the landscape. You mention deer populations increasing later in the manuscript, but what about earlier? Raccoons, coyotes, birds—which

animals would Pip see in the city? The presence of animals would make Spokane feel a lot less desolate while allowing the text to lean into the dystopian “life after humans” concept.

One Mile Cough

Related to the worldbuilding question, OMC needs a little more context. The book mentions that OMC wiped out 80 percent of the population in the valley, but where did it originate, and how did it get to Spokane? How quickly did it spread through the community, and how quickly did it kill the people it affected? Of the people affected, how many (like Whistler) survived? How many people did not catch the virus at all, and are those people naturally immune? Is Pip one? Did all of the survivors experience hallucinations/visions afterward?

Relating to the visions, consider establishing a clearer logic for them. Fly’s mother experienced visions before dying, but Whistler continues to have them even after surviving the cough. Did Pip’s mother have visions while she was sick? What might she have seen, and what would she have told Pip? Additionally, Pip believes Veronica to be a survivor of the cough, because Veronica has a similar energy to Whistler, yet Veronica isn’t said to experience visions. Consider how visions might affect Veronica’s running of the farm and the religious beliefs which are such a big part of her character. It’s easy to see how Veronica would believe her survival of the cough and subsequent visions to be divine in origin.

I also urge you to consider renaming One Mile Cough, or revising where the name came from. Attributing the name to the Chinese feels slightly too exoticizing. If you decide to lean into the vision question, there might be something to draw on there—a name that indicates the most unnerving side effect. I wonder if you could come up with a good acronym, like SIGHT? Or maybe it could have a “real” name, but everyone calls it the Sight? There’s lots of potential to play around with here, so have fun with it!

Characters

Pip

Pip is a complex, dynamic character with a sympathetic backstory and a lot of agency. She isn’t always easy to root for, but her flaws provide opportunity for growth and are part of what make her so compelling. There are just a few aspects of Pip’s character that need a bit of additional development for the reader to truly understand who she is.

Pip’s Appearance

Since the plot hinges on Pip being mistaken for a guy, it’s imperative for the reader to understand what she looks like. With a tight third-person narrative like this one, it’s difficult to find good opportunities for the protagonist to reflect on their appearance, but a natural place for this to come up could be after Pip rescues Iris, when Pip asks Iris, “So you’re... a girl?” Iris could very easily ask Pip the same thing, prompting Pip to explain her appearance to the reader.

An androgynous appearance would make sense for a dystopian society—Pip is probably too concerned with surviving to worry about applying makeup, and her clothing is probably more about function than form. We learn that Pip has small breasts, but what about her other secondary sex characteristics? Women tend to have wider hips and rounder faces than men, so maybe Pip has narrow hips and more angular features? Establishing here that Pip’s gender could be ambiguous will be a nice bit of foreshadowing, and the reader won’t be caught off guard later when Pip’s gender is in question.

Pip's Anger

Beyond Pip's appearance, I'd like to talk about Pip's anger. Her short temper and strong reactions are some of her most defining traits. She is often physically aggressive in order to get people to behave or comply with her wishes, and when startled, she tends to react with violence, as when she tackles Whistler after he yells at her. Her anger makes sense—learning about the bullying she endured in school was a huge aha moment for us as readers—but the evolution of her anger isn't really explored. She definitely gets less angry as the book goes on, but right now it seems incidental rather than intentional because she never learns anything from losing her temper. There's great potential here for Granville to be a foil to Pip: a concrete example of what happens when you let your anger at the world control you.

By engaging more deeply with Pip's anger, we could present Pip with a clear opportunity for growth. We see this evolution as being tied closely to her sisterly feelings toward Iris and her relationship with Fly. At the beginning of the book, Pip's life has fallen apart twice: first when she was kicked out of her home, and second when OMC devastated the world. After the death of Whistler, she again comes unmoored. Pip's journey in this book is more than physical: she is on an emotional quest, seeking love and family. Of course she finds both of those, in Iris and in Fly, but the text should focus more on that development. Pip's anger at what she thinks she has lost—the possibility of romantic and familial love—forces her to keep Iris and Fly at arm's length. It is only when she engages with the anger and realizes the harm it's causing that she can begin to let it go and start forming those emotional bonds.

To that end, I want to see Pip's anger have a tangible negative effect on her relationships. When she loses her temper with Iris and shakes her, Iris should react poorly (or perhaps even be injured?), emphasizing to Pip that she can't treat people like that and expect them to stick around. Same with Fly. Pip's anger is messy and complicated and definitely valid, but it's important for her to work through it. Let her confront her anger. Let her realize that it's holding her back, and allow her to move past it and grow.

Pip's Motivation

While Pip's motivation not to leave anyone behind is an excellent detail, we're not sure that having Utah be the inspiration behind her ethos is the best move. The fact that Utah is not even her dog, but a stranger's dog, and that his death occurs off-camera makes it kind of a letdown when the reader finally learns the big secret behind Pip's dog collar. Plus, as is mentioned in the line edit, a lot of Pip's thoughts when she first meets Iris seem to directly contradict this idea of her promising to never leave someone behind.

A stronger way to introduce this idea would be to have Whistler's death be Pip's primary motivator, especially if his death occurs as a result of something Pip did—whether that's leaving Whistler behind when she shouldn't have, or hesitating at a key moment and unintentionally losing the opportunity to save his life. Instead of upholding a promise to a dog, Pip could be upholding a promise to Whistler. This would also give Pip more opportunities to reflect on and mourn the loss of her friend. (The way the text reads currently, she almost mourns Utah more frequently than she mourns Whistler.)

Pip's Background

Often, the reader gets more information about supporting characters than they do about Pip. For example, we know that Whistler is former military; that Iris plays violin; and that Fly did 4-H. All of those traits inform that character's actions, but for Pip, we don't

see so much of this. Much of what makes Pip “Pip” can be traced directly back to her gender. Consider looking for places where readers can learn about Pip’s other defining traits. For example, was she a Boy Scout as a child? (That would explain her ability to navigate the wilderness outside Spokane without a map or a compass.) Despite being a city kid, Pip uses a lot of hunting imagery in her observations; did she and her dad go hunting prior to her diagnosis of being intersex? Currently, Pip specifically states that she does not have hunting experience when Granville asks, but the manuscript might work better if her background does include hunting.

Iris

Iris is one of the best characters in the book, but her actions and physicality often seem inconsistent with her age. We discussed the merits of aging her up or down, but we ended up agreeing that twelve-ish is the best age for her, because it allows her to still be somewhat self-sufficient while still being young enough to evoke Pip’s sisterly/protective instincts.

Iris rarely seems older than her age, aside from a few key moments of wisdom, but her actions and physicality often make her seem much younger than she is. The line edit addresses a few specific instances, but more generally, there are places where Iris seems disinclined to listen to Pip, not out of a preteen need to act out, but rather in a more childlike way, not understanding the imperativeness of her doing what Pip asks. She is frequently picked up and carried, often cries, and strikes Pip when they argue, which seems more fitting for a much younger child.

Additionally, keep an eye on how frequently Iris is reduced to her physical attributes in a way that other characters are not (e.g. “black hair shivered,” “brown eyes brimmed”). This is a common way of otherizing characters of different races than the protagonist, and all instances of this should be changed if possible.

Whistler

When it comes to Whistler, be wary of how Pip discusses his mental illness and make sure she isn’t too dismissive or glib when it comes to acknowledging Whistler’s problems. Although the text strongly implies that Whistler’s quirks are a direct result of his surviving OMC, Whistler’s military history could lead readers to assume they’re related to PTSD. This is particularly pressing because Veronica, whom Pip also hypothesizes to be a survivor of OMC, does not share many of Whistler’s characteristics.

Consider expanding Whistler’s role slightly by having him provide a little more direction for Pip and Iris in their journey, or help them craft some sort of detailed forward trajectory. Have him be the arbiter of the journey by revealing his visions and intentions to find a safe haven on a farm where good food is abundant and roving gangs are not.

Fly

Fly is such a compelling character, and we love the relationship between her and Pip. However, because Fly is gone for the vast majority of the book, we lose out on major opportunities to see her and Pip’s relationship develop. For this reason, rather than having Fly leave Traveler’s Rest, we strongly suggest Fly stay.

Currently, Fly’s reasons for leaving the farm seem a little thin. We understand her and Muscles’ reluctance to be the only black adults at the farm, but beyond the fact that the only other people of color present are a couple of children, the text does not give Fly and Muscles a compelling reason to leave. The only people who express racist thoughts toward them are

Camo, Navvy, and the rest of the human traffickers—the people who kidnapped them in the first place, and who literally treat them like slaves when they leave the farm.

We applaud your willingness to tackle racism in this book, but we're not sure *The Names We Take* is the best home for this conversation. The book already addresses some heavy issues, and does so with aplomb—introducing racism for the sake of decrying racism just distracts from the book's primary message. In addition, by having Fly stay at the farm, you have an opportunity to give more space and attention to Pip's bisexuality and the possible risks that introduces. We'll talk a bit more about this in the "Travelers' Rest" section.

Another possibility would be to have Fly already be at the farm when Pip arrives. Currently, we don't see a lot of mixing with the regular folks on the farm—Pip spends her time out with Granville and Marcus, or with Iris, although we do get some good scenes with Heather. Perhaps by having Fly be a member of the farm, it will more firmly enmesh Pip and Iris with the community—and then make it all the more dramatic when they realize they have to leave.

Granville

Right now, Granville's motivations aren't exactly clear. He seems to be evil for the sake of being evil, which at times makes his character cartoonish. Consider dialing back Granville's more odious character traits. He's sexist, yes, and homophobic, and a pedophile, but if these characteristics are insidious rather than obvious, he becomes much more threatening.

Pip also hates Granville basically on sight, which doesn't leave much room for tension to build. By introducing Granville's villainy in small, subtle doses, the reader will gradually begin to realize that Traveler's Rest is far from the haven Pip and Iris expected.

Pip's Parents

One of the biggest questions we had while reading was whether or not Pip's parents knew she was intersex. At times it seemed as though they were equally surprised to learn about it; at other times, it seemed like her parents had always known and were hiding it from her.

It might make the most sense (and create the most conflict) if Pip's parents always knew she was intersex. Based on Pip's descriptions of her genitals, it seems impossible for them to *not* have known, because if she gets periods, she has to have a uterus and a vagina, which her parents would definitely have noticed while changing her diapers. (Also, the doctor definitely would have said something when she was born.) As you know, plenty of parents of intersex babies choose to raise the child as either a boy or a girl, so if Pip's parents chose to raise her as a boy, it would make more sense for them to be upset when she decides to live as a girl.

The text also introduces some interesting ideas relating to Pip's parents, but doesn't necessarily take the time to explore them. Pip seems to have had a very close relationship with her parents prior to realizing she was intersex (except for one scene where her dad hits her for wearing lipstick as an eight-year-old boy, which we commented on in the manuscript) based on lines like "They were two peas in a pod until she got her first period" (128) and Pip's lingering fondness for her mother. The text also makes a passing reference to the idea of Pip's mother being unduly influenced by Pip's father—did that tension arise after Pip embraced her feminine identity?

Pip slowly peels back the layers of her relationship with her parents to reveal the moment they turned their back on her. The final break in their relationship is a failed "intervention" with a pastor. Is religion the ultimate dividing line between Pip and her parents? If so, be

more candid about that. Despite abandoning her, Pip's parents shaped a large part of her past. Pip is no doubt mourning them and would have other snippets of them pop up from time to time—both good and bad.

If there's room for it, it could be interesting to tease out further parallels between Granville's hold over Veronica and Pip's father's hold over her mother. The book briefly mentions this idea, but it could definitely be developed further.

Clare

It would be helpful to have at least one more scene with Clare. There should be an additional layer to her and Pip's relationship. They only meet once aside from the wedding and that is a very limited amount of interaction for Clare to invite this person to her heavily guarded and secreted home.

Marcus

Marcus and Granville's relationship is fascinating. Why is Marcus Granville's right-hand man? How did that come about? Related to the idea of making Granville a more well-rounded character (as opposed to a one-dimensional villain), consider what it means for him to be close with one of the only characters with an obvious physical disability. What is their history? Instead of Granville using Marcus's deafness to isolate him from the other inhabitants of the farm, what if Granville happily filled the role of translator?

Traveler's Rest

As it is currently written, Traveler's Rest is a difficult place to understand. The farm is quite successful, more than capable of feeding all forty-odd people who live there, yet Veronica is so desperate for more workers that she asks Granville to send the human traffickers to Spokane to kidnap people off the street and bring them to work the farm against their will. Once delivered, their choices are to stay, or go back with the villains who brought them there.

Consider giving Veronica a more specific and sympathetic goal. Rather than having her run a simple commune, we envision her creating Traveler's Rest specifically as a haven for young women and children. Veronica clearly has a soft spot for kids, and for young women—she welcomes the children and women from the moving truck with open arms, but makes it clear to the men that they're on probation until she says otherwise. Why not expand that idea?

By shifting Veronica's focus to saving women and children, her reasoning for recruiting Navvy and Camo becomes much more understandable. Instead of having them grab random people off the street, they're specifically targeting orphaned children, like Iris and her friends, or young women like Fly and Pip. In this light, Veronica's actions become sympathetic—she's still kidnapping them, yes, but she's doing so because she genuinely believes they'd be safer on her farm. And in all honesty, they probably would be.

Placing an emphasis on saving women and children also creates space for Granville's motivations. Currently, it isn't clear why exactly he wants to preside over Veronica's farm. He and his men just came in while Veronica was weak, and the next thing everyone knew, the farm had armed guards. By having Veronica specifically seeking to build a safe haven for women and children, we can see Granville's interest in sticking around: he has a built-in supply of young women and girls to prey on.

Pip's Intersex Identity

Currently, most of the tension at Traveler's Rest arises from Pip's worry that she will be outed as a girl and be sent back with the human traffickers. However, the evidence supporting her fear is, at best, scant. Pip believes that since Veronica specifically wanted strong workers, she would not keep Pip around if she realizes Pip is a girl, but Veronica makes it very clear when the moving truck arrives at Traveler's Rest that women and children will be welcomed in, no questions asked. If anything, Pip telling Veronica that she's a girl would only guarantee Pip's safety. Under no circumstances would Veronica, after learning Pip is a girl, throw her back to the human traffickers who brought her to the farm.

If Traveler's Rest is revised to become a haven for women and children, though, Pip's intersex status could still very much be a source of tension. Veronica is a very conservative person; parallels are intentionally drawn between her and Pip's family, who consulted with their pastor before throwing her out. If Veronica were to learn that Pip is intersex (especially if she learns that Pip was born Noah Philip and raised as a boy, or that Pip has a penis), she would almost certainly react poorly.

Additional Sources of Tension

In addition to Pip's intersex status, tension could arise from her and Fly's burgeoning relationship. At one point in the text, Pip speculates that Veronica would not be happy to learn that Pip is bisexual. By keeping Fly on the farm and letting her and Pip begin to explore their feelings for each other, there's a real risk that their relationship will be found out. This also reinforces one of the book's primary themes: the idea of being forced to hide who you are. By giving Pip and Fly space to embrace their identities while simultaneously forcing them to keep their identities secret, the tension will bloom gradually, forcing them to eventually confront the question: can they be happy somewhere where they can't be themselves?

The third source of tension would arise as Pip and Fly realize that Granville is grooming the girls at the farm. This is classic predator behavior, and it's all the more threatening for sometimes being hard to spot.

Pip, Iris, and Fly would still need to flee Traveler's Rest quickly for the safety of Clare's ranch (probably as a result of Pip being "outed," or of someone discovering Pip and Fly's relationship), because Pip would never leave the farm with Granville still in power over the young girls. They would have to flee for their own safety, which would provide a great opportunity for Pip to agonize over leaving all those girls behind.

The Skins

Marauding gangs are a hallmark of the urban dystopia. We noticed that in an earlier version of the manuscript, Spokane was controlled by three or four rival gangs, but it seems like the Skins are the only ones to have made the cut to this version.

Although the Skins are quintessential dystopian villains, they only propel the plot forward in the first fifty-five pages of the book, after which we don't hear from them again. In its current form, *The Names We Take* has a lot of moving parts. In order to simplify the plot and keep the narrative tightly focused, consider cutting the Skins and replacing them with Camo, Nabby, and the rest.

This would streamline things in a number of ways. First, instead of the Skins being responsible for the deaths of Iris's friends, Iris's friends could be captured by the traffickers and taken to

Traveler's Rest. Rumors of kidnappers targeting children and young women could circulate in Spokane, which would help explain Pip's fear as she navigates the city. She and Iris could still meet on the bridge after Pip's run-in with the traffickers at the library, and Iris could inform Pip of the threat the traffickers pose. (This would also help cement their decision to stay at Traveler's Rest—if Pip, Iris, and Fly arrive and all of Iris's friends are there telling her how great it is, they'd be much more likely to give the place a chance.)

Then, instead of having the Skins decide to attack the music store in retribution for Whistler killing one of them, the confrontation could arise when the traffickers attempt to kidnap Iris and Pip. Whistler, in attempting to defend/save them, would die as he does currently, which would provide Pip's motivation for the rest of the book, and give her plenty of reasons to hate the traffickers.

The Journey to Clare's

Clare describes her house as being "well over ten miles" from Traveler's Rest, but by our (very rough) estimation, Pip and Iris travel at least forty-five miles to get to her house. This is based on the amount of time they spend walking and biking, as well as the various text cues where Pip observes how much distance they've covered. (Assuming a typical walking pace of twenty minutes per mile, it would only take a healthy adult human about three and a half hours to go ten miles. Assuming frequent stops and accounting for unfamiliar terrain, I could see it taking as many as seven.)

Clare does acknowledge when they arrive at her ranch that she may have underestimated the distance a bit. We know she values privacy, because the location of her house is a secret, but it doesn't make sense for her to give them such an inaccurate estimate. By the time they'd gone twenty miles, surely Pip would have assumed they'd taken a wrong turn somewhere?

Consider shortening the distance they travel or have Clare give a slightly more accurate estimation. She obviously isn't *that* worried about her privacy with Pip, considering she gave Pip otherwise-accurate instructions to get to her front door.

Gas-powered Vehicles

Although Clare's primary transportation is a truck pulled by mules, plenty of other characters in the book get around via gas-powered vehicles. This includes the moving truck and the motorcycle, the Skins' car that they crash into the music store, and Granville's truck. The thing is, gasoline goes bad without fuel stabilizer. It's highly unlikely that after a year, everyone would have access to enough gasoline (in a usable state) to continue using cars so freely.

This isn't a huge deal, and probably not something the average reader would pick up on, but it's definitely something to consider. (Although even if the average reader doesn't know that fuel goes bad, they might wonder where the folks at Traveler's Rest are getting so much gas.)

An obvious solution would be to give all of the other cars the Clare treatment: get rid of the engines and have them be pulled by mules or horses, or just have them use good old-fashioned wagons.

Butterflies

In general, the theme of butterflies should be applied with a little heavier hand in the middle portion of the story to provide connective tissue. Monarch butterflies do actually migrate around North America in swarms. What if a swarm descended on Traveler's Rest and acted as something like a signal and reminder to Pip of Whistler's vision and what her ultimate goal was?

The butterflies were supposed to symbolize safety and home and acceptance and belonging to Pip (and/or they could) but Traveler's Rest is not that place for her. She needs to migrate, like the butterflies, to the place where she can truly thrive. Or maybe there was some way to associate Fly with butterflies earlier in the story without it being too overt, to ease into the later revelation? We loved the poetic turn of all that, but we want it to resonate and compound throughout the story, not just be a footnote dropped into the last chapter.

Slavery Imagery

While the text skirts around labeling the capture and servitude of the survivors as slavery, it uses a lot of the imagery of slavery, especially in the context of introducing two of the characters of color. Camo and his lot are essentially slave catchers; they put the survivors in chains and lug them off to a farm to "work for food and shelter." The issue is only really addressed by Fly and Muscles' aversion to staying.

Folks are going to make a slavery comparison, regardless of whether the text swerves around calling it that. It's not something that needs to change necessarily, because in a lawless dystopian society, this kind of stuff would likely happen. But perhaps to avoid a more direct correlation, eliminate using chains, especially looped around the neck. Why not wrists zip-tied or hobbled at the feet instead? Chains are very tricky to explain away when there are other methods of bondage that have less troubling and racist connotation.

If the manuscript wants to lean more into the slavery, then it needs to be a bigger issue. Currently, it's politely dismissed by everyone about ten minutes into their stay at Traveler's Rest. Being chained and beaten is incredibly dehumanizing and Veronica and Heather need to address this more for any of these individuals to fully trust them. Veronica's insistence that any disobedience means death is also introduced at roughly this same time and that should put everyone on edge. So they were stolen, beaten, chained, and are essentially being forced into servitude where any disobedience ends in death?

These things should be giving Pip much more pause. They are worth talking more about in that moment when they are occurring. Why aren't any of the survivors being like, "You chained and beat us. An old woman died. This is highly screwed up."

Much of these issues will be resolved if Traveler's Rest is reimagined as a haven for women and children, especially if Fly is at Traveler's Rest from the beginning. Even if Pip, Iris, and other youths are brought to the farm against their will, Veronica's motivation is revealed to be less about acquiring forced labor and more about guaranteeing safety for vulnerable populations.

Religion

References to Christian religion are peppered throughout the manuscript, and seem to want to coalesce as a theme. Since Pip is intersex, there is likely a natural conflict with a lot of religious communities as to what her gender should be and how she should present it. Clearly, her parents had their own ideas and attempted to use religion to persuade Pip to their side. Veronica recites Bible verses and is set up as a possible antagonist but ends up being a bit of a non-starter when it comes to the narrative. There is opportunity to press more firmly into the theme of how religion views and condemns and alienates intersex individuals, but that depends on where the narrative wants to go with Traveler's Rest and how religious Pip's parents really were. Just something to keep in mind.

Miscellaneous Narrative Questions

- ◇ How has the collapse of society affected these characters? Pip was homeless before, so her life probably doesn't look that much different than it did. How is Iris coping with fending for herself less than a year after losing her parents? What did Whistler do before OMC? What did Granville do?
- ◇ How quickly did society collapse? Did everything change overnight, as in *Station Eleven*, or did it happen slowly, as in *The Dreamers*?
- ◇ How long did it take to lose electricity? Running water? The internet? What's the government doing?
- ◇ The Speech of Aristophanes comes from Plato's Symposium—though the speech is credited to Aristophanes, Plato wrote the fictional account of Aristophanes giving the speech. We might consider crediting Plato instead, as Aristophanes never said or wrote these words. Additionally, the speech talks about accepting women who love women and men who love men, which Clare includes, but what she leaves out is the importance placed on what they called "Androgynes." This feels like a missed opportunity, as Clare could be using the speech to indicate to Pip that she knows Pip is intersex and that Clare is accepting and supportive of Pip and her intersexuality. It could be like a reverse dog whistle: "I see you, and you're safe with me."

Structure

The book's structure is straightforward, occurring chronologically with occasional reflections from Pip. At 74,000 words, the book is a good length, but there are some areas that need to be reworked. A few scenes could also be cut, which would give you plenty of room to expand on other, more interesting ideas.

Areas to Cut

- ◇ The section where Pip and Iris are traveling to Clare's should definitely be shortened. Some of these cuts will happen naturally if you decide to keep Fly at Traveler's Rest—for example, they won't run into Fly at the auto graveyard, because she will already be with them.
- ◇ Cut the scene where Granville rapes the young girl. Granville doesn't have to be explicitly outed as a rapist in order to be a threat to Pip and Iris, and by making his villainy more insidious, we make him more compelling. Additionally, it doesn't make much sense for Granville to take Pip along on this outing. Why would he trust her with something like that?
- ◇ Cut the scene where the occupants of the moving van are made to clear a wreck from the road. The human traffickers travel between Spokane and the farm frequently enough that they would know a clear route to take. (Also, if you revise the manuscript so that the human traffickers are only picking up children and young women, it's less likely that they would have the muscle to do this.)

The Beginning

The beginning of the book works quite well. The fact that it isn't immediately obvious that we're dealing with a dystopian world, that for all we know Pip could be a normal girl getting books from the library, makes it all the more powerful when we realize the danger Pip faces and how far from normal her life actually is. That said, the reader does need to understand why Pip believes she's in danger. When Camo and company arrive in the library to loot books, Pip pegs them as traders, but we're given no clue as to why she would be afraid of them.

If you decide to replace the Skins with Camo et al, Pip's fear can be explained by her knowledge of the fact that someone in the area is kidnapping children and carting them to destinations unknown.

It also might help to establish a little more forward trajectory in these first few chapters. Every good dystopia has a safe haven that the characters yearn to flee to, only to discover it's much more treacherous and insidious than they imagined. Pip sort of stumbles into hers, and it leaves the reader feeling a little listless in the first third of the book. There's plenty of stuff happening, but to what end? Are Whistler's visions pointing them north and they are on the move gathering final supplies when they run into Iris? Did they hear about Traveler's Rest through some local survivors, and with their food supplies running low and the city picked clean, realize the only way for long term survival is to farmstead? It's okay for Pip and Whistler to take more control of the narrative here. Give our companions something to look forward to.

The Climax

Granville dies seventy pages before the end of the novel—69 percent of the way into the book. Since Fly's confrontation with the traffickers occurs off-camera, there's no real climax. Granville dies, and then they walk, and then they arrive at Clare's house, and then the book ends.

To rectify this, consider having Granville die during the gunfight with the traffickers. If Fly stays at Traveler's Rest and ends up fleeing with Iris and Pip, Granville, the traffickers, and Granville's men can come after them. (Depending on why Pip, Iris, and Fly leave—if Pip is revealed to be intersex or if someone discovers Pip and Fly's relationship—Granville could frame his pursuit as a “rescue” of Iris from the “degenerates” who've “kidnapped” her.)

This pursuit would up the ante as the group makes its way toward Clare's house. Depending on when they leave, Pip, Iris, and Fly might have several hours' head start, and of course the pursuers wouldn't necessarily know which direction they were heading in. Either way, Granville's group could catch up with Pip's group on the edge of Clare's property, necessitating a standoff in which Pip and Fly would, of course, emerge victorious. We see them sending Iris to Clare's for safety and Iris arriving in time to send Clare back to help them, but backup could also arrive from the farm—maybe Heather realizes what's going on and takes a group to stop Granville?

Language

Dialogue

The dialogue between Pip and Iris is the heart of the story. You've struck a great balance of antagonism and affection that's unique to sibling relationships, and it does a lot of very elegant work towards establishing their relationship and developing their characteristic idiosyncrasies. Well done! A great example of their bond, even in the face of trauma, comes on page 191 when Pip is contemplating their circumstances and Iris says, “Tap your tooth, it'll help you think.” Just one of many instances where we understand their quirks, their love for each other, their humor—all through dialogue.

Overall, the dialogue is fairly tight, but certain passages are littered with too much stage direction and over description. There are points when it works and it's okay to leave it be, but there are also moments where the words the characters speak carry the weight and don't need to be further explained to the reader. Some of the tags and the stage direction get in the way of the

moment or the power of the exchanges. Be wary of that. There are also moments in the dialogue where characters say things that are age-inappropriate, or a little too lyrical/poetic/prose-y to be dialogue. Instead of a verbal exchange between characters in their own words, it feels like a chunk of the narrative being verbalized. Watch for those moments and prune them.

We've noted specifics in the line edit, but in order to illustrate our point, we're including some examples here.

This exchange between Pip and Whistler on page 18 is excellent:

He scratched his tangled hair. "Yeah. I might have killed somebody too."
"They took your cart?"
"There might have been a few of them."
"Whist." Pip sighed. So much for his idea of a fun day out. Out of habit, she checked the street. Whistler was a crack shot. Even so, she wasn't sure how many people he could fight if they were ambushed. Better hurry up and introduce him to Iris.
"I found a stray."

The dialogue is tight, and functions well with minimal dialogue tags. The beats of action and Pip's observations break up the exchange without distracting from it.

This example from page 37 sounds too much like narrative prose. It's beautiful, but doesn't fit tonally with Iris's usual speaking voice:

"We were all kids. **When one of the boys didn't return with the rising sun, we boarded up the windows on the lower floors and took all our supplies upstairs to the attic.** We were terrified."

Finally, here's an example from page 238 of dialogue with too much stage direction:

Iris took a deep breath and confided, "I killed Granville."
Fly's head came up in surprise. "Who?"
Iris chewed a dirty fingernail and looked to Pip.
"The belt-buckle man from the farm. His name was Granville," Pip said. "There wasn't time to explain before he tried to stop us from escaping Traveler's Rest and almost succeeded. He tackled me to the ground. It was a fight to the death. Iris saved me."
Iris looked pure love at Pip then dropped her eyes to the ground. "I stabbed Granville in the back."
In a move of tenderness that Pip would never have expected, Fly kissed Iris on the forehead. "That was the right thing to do."

The inclusion of so much movement—Fly raising her head, Iris chewing her fingernail, Iris looking at Pip, Fly kissing Iris on the forehead—distracts from the dialogue. In instances like these, look for opportunities to minimize the stage direction and let the dialogue itself carry the meaning.

Introductions in dialogue can be cut as well. There are roughly twenty or so named characters and the text spends wasted time having them greet one another. For instance, Clare knows who Granville is. Skip straight to the meat of their conversation. Also be wary of characters overusing one another's names. In real life people don't often use names, so it comes off as too scripted if people are casually name dropping in conversation.

Beware overusing the ellipses. It appears often in dialogue throughout the manuscript and those instances should be pruned down to a small handful and mostly confined to characters who seem to take more time with speaking or sit in more silence.

Spokane

The descriptions of the dystopian environment are fantastic, but the actual layout of Spokane feels a little murky, especially for folks who've never been there. A brief two- to three-paragraph background of the city where most of the action takes place would be great here. What was the population like before? Socio-economic factors? Consider including a larger descriptive map of the city in the first few chapters.

Use of Slurs

The manuscript addresses sensitive topics, including racism and discrimination against intersex and queer people. Since this is a book geared toward a YA audience, we encourage you to look for moments in which characters use slurs and rewrite the dialogue to remove them. We've noted these instances in the manuscript, but you do such a great job of establishing your characters that overt slurs are often unnecessary.

Discussion of Genitalia

Although it's important for readers to understand what being intersex means, Pip's frank and often self-deprecating discussion of her primary sex characteristics with Iris comes across as a little aggressive when one considers their five-year age difference. Beyond that, it's a *lot* to share with someone she barely knows.

Rather than having Pip focus so heavily on her genitals when talking to Iris, consider keeping it more high-level. She tells Iris that she's "something extra. An XXY" and that she's "a boy... also a girl." For a twelve-year-old, that's probably enough information. The most important thing for Iris to know is that Pip's body has both male and female characteristics, but Pip identifies as a girl.

If you do want to include more specific discussions of Pip's genitalia, perhaps she could have that conversation with Fly. Particularly if Fly stays at Traveler's Rest and she and Pip begin developing their relationship, it would make more sense for the two of them to have that discussion. Iris doesn't need to know about Pip's genitals, but Fly very well might.

The Name of Traveler's Rest

Would you consider renaming Traveler's Rest? It sounds a little Tolkien-ish. Plus—and this might be intentional, but—the name implies a sort of transitory state, as though people are welcome to stop by, heal, and move on, but in reality, that's far from the case. Perhaps something implying a final destination, a sort of paradise, would be more fitting.

Descriptions

Be careful of cheapening your descriptions by using words that are too easy or relatable for the sake of being easy or relatable. A few examples of this are: "Each step was the world's most dangerous version of red-light green-light," "Wonder Woman-style," and "Pip's heart sank faster than the Titanic."

The first sentence appears during an intense experience. They meet the tiger near the water and are facing off with it before their escape, but the inclusion of "red-light green-light" immediately takes the reader out of the tense confrontation. It's good to make your descriptions relatable to

the reader, but make sure your descriptions match up. Trust your talent. You have excellent instinct for crisp description; run with it.

Action Sequences

The language used throughout is both strong and lyrical, smart and punchy. However, during some of the middle and later action sequences, the description starts to move in front of the action. Action description should be quick, memorable in some aspects, but functioning in service to the action described. The sentences used in these sections should be shorter and much more concise than in other portions of the manuscript. When the pace is lazy, the words can be lazy. When the pace is frantic, the sentences should adjust to fit. Trim sentences down to their most efficient. The first chapter has some great examples of well-articulated action, so re-read those and pull from that to edit the later wilderness action scenes.

Age-Appropriate References

These are tagged in the line edit as well, but there are metaphors, phrases, or idioms used that don't seem to fit with the age or region where they are placed. Some of the lingo that is used by the narrator, but piped into Pip, sounds old-fashioned or just out of step for what a teenager would use to describe something. We also need to see some of the metaphors grounded in Pip's lived experiences, or used as conduits into her past to learn more about her and connect with the journey she's been through pre-apocalypse, because that is heavily informing her post-apocalypse experience. She references farm and hunting imagery that, as an urban dweller, would likely not be top of mind in a crisis or action scenario. Cows, dogs, and deer are used frequently. This would make more sense coming from Fly, who indicates she has had farm experience through 4-H. Maybe that's Pip background wanting to peek out? Maybe Pip was the 4-H kid. It would give her decision to stay at Traveler's Rest an extra layer, and make Clare's gesture a little less saintly and much more practical.

Chapter Breaks/Transitions

A few of the chapter breaks need better transitions. They cut off mid-scene, sometimes mid-dialogue or in the middle of an action sequence. This certainly gives the reader a reason to flip to the next chapter, but there's no sense of completion from the previous scene, so it's less of a want to and more of a "have-to" in order to get that sense of completion. Chapter breaks can be tricky to find, but should occur naturally, when a scene closes up and leaves the reader wondering what's to happen next. Not because it's incomplete, but because the question of that scene was answered and a new one posed. All scenes function as answers to questions, and by their end should pose another question as set up for the next scene, building on the tension or relief or whatever came before it and needs to come after it. That's where the chapter break should be placed.

Comma Splices

Be careful of comma splices! There are quite a few in the book. A comma splice is when a comma joins two complete sentences without a coordinating conjunction. For example:

He revved the engine, the sound of it rang in Pip's ears with a warning.

There are lots of ways to fix comma splices. The above example could take a semicolon ("He revved the engine; the sound of it rang in Pip's ears with a warning.") or a coordinating conjunction ("He revved the engine, and the sound of it rang in Pip's ears with a warning.") or be broken into two sentences ("He revved the engine. The sound of it rang in Pip's ears with a warning.").

As you revise, keep an eye out for comma splices that you can fix. (We'll also fix them during the heavy copyedit, so don't worry if you can't catch them all.)

Global Copyediting Suggestions

Tightening the language of the book can be quickly remedied by finding every “just, that, had, saw, sound, felt” and either deleting it, or making a good case for why it should remain. Searching the Word document is a quick and easy way to view how many instances appear in the manuscript, go directly to the examples, and review each use for relevancy.

Also, feel free to liberally use contractions. Contractions are expected and concise and useful for streamlining sentences, especially in dialogue. A few characters might use more formal modes of speech, like Veronica. Deciding who does and doesn't use contractions will go a long way in helping to shape separate character voices.

Other phrases to review and eliminate: “had been,” “started to,” or any use of the word “suddenly.” If someone is “starting to” do something, unless it's important to note that they are at the very beginning, just have them do the thing. Two additional culprits are “was” and “being.” They almost always take the place of a stronger hitting verb.

Miscellaneous Language Notes

- ◇ Shiver, shudder, glance: All told, “glance” appears 62 times in the manuscript; as a general note, readers are less interested in where a character is looking than what they are seeing. We recommend removing at least half of the instances where this word is used. Additionally, “shiver” and “shudder” appear 25 times total. Look for other ways to phrase these actions.
- ◇ Smiles split their faces: This phrase/idea only occurs half a dozen times, but readers notice when authors rely on the same ideas too often in a book. We recommend halving the number of times a smile splits a character's face.
- ◇ Free indirect discourse: There are a few times when you use free indirect discourse, and it makes for a much better read than specifying “Pip thought” and italicizing her thoughts. Not only is it a smoother read, but it allows readers to feel more as though they are seeing the world through Pip's eyes, rather than through the eyes of an omniscient narrator. I recommend changing all instances of “Pip thought” to free indirect discourse.
- ◇ Trust your audience: We find a few times wherein Pip's observations are explained well, but then the thought ends with explicitly stating what a reader would already understand (e.g. “There was no doubt, Veronica was uncompromising. Pip reconsidered the leader of Traveler's Rest. She was fiercely protective of the kids. That was something to be admired. Even so, something about Veronica was tinfoil in the mouth. Bitter and unexpected. Pip didn't trust her.” We don't need “Pip didn't trust her” because we already understand how she feels about Veronica.

Recommended Media

If you have the time or the interest, assuming you haven't read them already, I think you'll find this list of books helpful—and hopefully inspiring. We've also included some other media.

Books

- ◇ *Station Eleven* by Emily St. John Mandel: A deadly virus destroys civilization within days. The action takes place during the onset and immediate aftermath of the sickness, as well as fifteen years into the future, after society has rebuilt itself as best it could.
- ◇ *The Dreamers* by Karen Thompson Walker: Rather than wreaking global devastation, the virus in this book only affects a small college community. The most instructive parts of this book are the quarantine scenes, as well as the scenes where the sick outnumber the healthy people attempting to care for them.
- ◇ *The First Twenty* by Jennifer Lavoie: This may sound counterintuitive, but reading a book like this can help reveal tropes of the genre that you might want to subvert or avoid.
- ◇ *The Albino Album* by Chavisa Woods: This book may offer insight on how to address race/queerness/other identity intersections all at once.
- ◇ *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. LeGuin: It features ambisex characters and excellent world-building, addresses androgyny, and is staunchly feminist.
- ◇ *Middlesex* by Jeffrey Eugenides: A highly lauded book featuring an intersex protagonist.
- ◇ *Pantomime* by Laura Lam: Features a bisexual, intersex character building a chosen family.

Other Media

- ◇ *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*: A movie/musical about a transgender woman remaking her identity. The song "The Origin of Love" is a retelling of the myth Clare speaks about at the wedding in Traveler's Rest. Pip would likely know about Hedwig and have watched it in an effort to see some of her journey and struggle replicated onscreen.
- ◇ *The Walking Dead*: The comic book, not the show, is a great example of societal breakdown in which the survivors are pitted against many different elements: surviving other people, surviving nature, and surviving a deadly virus. It leans on similar themes to *The Names We Take*, but is a strong example of what not to replicate in terms of tone. In a YA dystopian, there is still an element of hope, no matter how bad things get. In *The Walking Dead*, the wandering aimlessness is cranked up to an almost intolerable and depressing degree.
- ◇ Music:
 1. My Father's Father - The Civil Wars
 2. Resurrection Fern - Iron & Wine
 3. Middle Cyclone - Neko Case
 4. The Dress Looks Nice On You - Sufjan Stevens
 5. Everywhere I Go - Lissie
 6. The Origin of Love - John Cameron Mitchell

Steps for Revision

We've given you quite a lot of feedback here, and we understand if it seems overwhelming! For that reason, we're including these suggested revision steps to help guide you as you begin to rework the manuscript.

First, we suggest tackling the biggest changes, the ones that will require the most substantial revisions. Rework the beginning of the manuscript so Navvy and her crew are the primary antagonists; revise the sections at Traveler's Rest to include Fly; and rewrite the climax so that Granville and the rest of the bad guys die on-screen. As you complete this portion of the revision, you'll also naturally find places to cut, and to expand (such as adding more scenes between Fly and Pip).

Second, address the remaining major narrative issues. Address inconsistencies in characterization and decide which threads to expand upon, such as teasing out more parallels between Veronica/Granville and Pip's parents.

Third, go through the accompanying line edit and address the page-specific comments. (Many of these questions will cease to be relevant if you cut the text they accompany, which is why we suggest doing this step last. No sense in rewriting something just to delete it later.)

Finally, take a break from the manuscript. Let it rest for as long as you can before coming back to it and making a final pass. Implement whatever last-minute tweaks or adjustments you decide on, and then send it back to us for the next round of editing.

Parting Words

It's a lot to take in, but I hope it's clear how much we care about this book by how deeply we engaged with the manuscript. Pip's story is compelling and provides a valuable and much-needed perspective, and we are confident that with a little polish, *The Names We Take* will be even more profound, insightful, and memorable than it already is.

Thank you again for giving Ooligan the opportunity to work on such an important and heartfelt story. We look forward to receiving the next version of the manuscript from you, and we can't wait to see where Pip's story goes from here.

If you have any questions or would like to discuss any of the ideas contained in this letter or in the accompanying line edit, please don't hesitate to get in touch. We are always eager and available to help in whatever way you need.

Sincerely,

Madison Schultz
Outgoing Managing Editor

Kelly Hogan
Outgoing Project Manager

Melinda Crouchley
Incoming Managing Editor

Hazel Wright
Incoming Project Manager