

MANUSCRIPT ASSESSMENT FOR

Double Take

WRITTEN BY

[redacted]

About this report

The purpose of this assessment of your story, *Double Take*, is to provide an overview of the manuscript in terms of its strengths and to highlight areas for further development. The assessment does not seek to make any edits with regard to spelling, grammar or punctuation; that is the domain of your editor.

The emphasis of the report is predominantly to provide guidance to the author with regard to the polishing of a manuscript in order to improve the overall quality, readability and marketability of the writing.

It does this by providing comments regarding the style of writing, the plot, dialogue and so on, with a view to giving guidance for making any improvements that might be beneficial.

Summary

Nick is a freelance photographer tasked with photographing people and events at a local political conference. While wandering around looking for shots, he captures an intense moment between a key political figure and an unknown woman. Nick considers the implications of the photo and the financial gain he can make on it. That is until he catches the news a few days later and sees that the unknown woman in the photo has been murdered. Nick decides to take the photo to the police. Although, the key political figure is interviewed nothing comes of it as another man is convicted of the crime. This doesn't sit well with Nick who senses there's more to it than meets the eye.

Two years later Nick is photographing the same key political figure who has now been elected Prime Minister. Later while reviewing his shots on his laptop he sees a familiar face in the crowd; the murdered woman. This prompts Nick to launch his own personal investigation into this unknown woman, her murder, her doppelganger and the key political figure.

This story's themes are mystery and intrigue as Nick delves into dark corners of a broken political system where deals for murder are made in exchange for places of power. Nick isn't naïve but he has a good heart that seeks justice. He wants the real killer brought to the light despite the scapegoat being a vile man himself.

This report is designed to take your writing to the next level. The structure of this story is strong but there are some things you need to work on to fill it out and make it shine. I did find the story to be quite the page turner but in the following I'll highlight some areas that work and others that should be 'fixed' to ready it for publication.

Plot

I found that you have a firm grasp on plot. Everything that happens, happens for a reason. This kept the story moving forward at a pretty speedy pace. About the first half of the book you draw out the story but by the end it feels like you're speeding things up a little too much. The relationship with Emma and Nick seemed to be progressing along at a nice pace. I could sense the chemistry between them before the kiss. The kiss came at an awkward time. I would suggest slowing their relationship down. They can still do all the same stuff, like meeting Nick's parents for lunch or rooming in the same apartment, and it doesn't affect the friendship they're building. It would be more effective if you build the sexual tension between them through the book and finally they kiss after she's released at the end.

The chapters at the end of the manuscript feel like they're fast tracked but not action packed. I would suggest adding more action and slowing down the pace just a little. The scenes feel rushed. I'm not suggesting you add in filler. You've done a decent job of keeping any unneeded fluff out. Later on in this review I suggest removing several chapters. With those chapters gone you have more room to fill out the scenes, word count wise.

Structure and style

I noticed right away that the chapters are short. This is good to keep the story moving and the pages turning. You have a solid story that definitely moves quite quickly. Some things, however, feel like they move too fast. I couldn't help but wonder if the story would benefit from a bit of slowing it down. Not too much though.

There are continuity issues. For instance, I found this one early in the novel:

He hurried back to the kitchens and was looking for Pierre when someone approached him. It was one of the others he'd spoken to initially; a broad Scot with shiny bald head and the blue-veined nose of a serious drinker.

"You looking for Pierre again pal?" he asked, the name sounding odd where he split it into two syllables – Pea-air.

"Yeah I was, but maybe you can help me mate. Just a quick question, might sound daft, but are the emergency exits in this place alarmed?"

Pierre looked puzzled for a moment, furrowing his eyebrows and then he shrugged his shoulders.

First Nick is looking for Pierre but finds a broad Scot instead. He doesn't find Pierre but then it says 'Pierre looked puzzled'. And then this line:

"Cheers mate, thanks a lot," Nick replied and headed back outside leaving the chef with a still puzzled look on his face.

Nick still hasn't found Pierre but it's still describing the conversation between him and the broad Scot as though he were Pierre.

I would suggest removing several chapters that aren't from Nick's perspective, including the prologue. Those chapters would be 4, 6, 8, 10, and 11. Most of the information that is gleaned from those chapters can be interwoven into Nick's perspective. Hall's feelings about the photo and something not being right can be either given one very short chapter just to establish that, if it's needed further down the line. Or it can be relayed to Nick through a phone conversation. In that case you would have to remove the House of Cards quote and have Hall actually say something substantial about his feelings to Nick. I recommend this because it

also sets up and establishes a connection between Hall and Nick which would make more sense for Nick when he reaches out to Hall two years later. But because the House of Cards quote plays a role in later chapters, you'd have to find a way to incorporate it differently here.

Then there's that one chapter later in the book from Hall's perspective, in which he receives a visit from two thugs in a BMW. That is the only chapter worth keeping outside of Nick's perspective. However, if you did decide to get rid of this chapter I don't think you would lose anything because Hall ends up explaining to Nick later what happened anyways.

In the following quote:

"I guess so ... Merrick and Sharon went out with each other at University. They met again some years later, possibly at the conference in 2006."

It's being said that the conference happened in 2006 but the beginning of the book clearly states its 2011. It appears as though you made some changes and didn't account for this detail. I would also suggest removing the years completely as it can feel less contemporary. Where you have 2011, I would put no date. Where you have 2013, I suggest you put 'two years later'. A reader wants to feel like the story is happening now and already 2013 feels like ancient history. It's only going to feel more ancient down the line. Although, it is important to have your timeline in mind when you're writing.

"Yes Brian, your darling Rosie, your beautiful three year old granddaughter..."

"They showed me a picture of my four year old granddaughter..."

The previous chapter Rosie was mentioned it said she was three so it looks inconsistent when she's brought up again and she's four.

Again he messed around for a while in Photoshop, cropping and zooming and then something caught his eye. In the crowd was a face he had last seen on his laptop two years ago. It was Sharon Lawson.

This could use more build up. You did a good job by ending the chapter here. It definitely helps build the mystery but it feels like you do such a good job on

describing the process of cutting and zooming the photos and then Sharon Lawson just flops out. You don't need much more here; 2-3 sentences perhaps.

"... She said that she had been an only child..."

"Did she say if she had any brothers or sisters?"

"You know, she never said directly that she didn't have any brothers or sisters..."

"She had been an only child" followed up with the question, "Did she say if she any brothers or sisters?" answered by "she never said directly that she didn't..." Do you see the error here? Mrs. Vickers already said Sharon said she was an only child, so why does Nick follow up with the question he did? And then Mrs. Vickers completely changes her answer. There are many small continuity errors that you should be on the look out for.

Descriptions

This book isn't heavy on descriptions. The focus is more on the exposition. For the most part that works. The descriptions you do have are utilitarian and get the job done. However, you could benefit from adding more detail for greater clarity.

Example of a good description:

*Each with beer-loving stomachs squashed inside ill-fighting uniforms,
Round and round went each picture, filling the whole screen, and
daring him to believe in ghosts.*

Example of a clunky description:

*He picked up his bag and walked over to the door the MP had gone
through and realised it was an emergency exit for the hotel.*

Examples where you'll benefit from more detail:

*Nick tried to get his fingernails into the crack between the two doors,
but they were firmly shut.*

This makes it sound like his finger nails were firmly shut

*Nick grinned to himself as he drove off; for that picture he wouldn't
have minded getting a parking fine.*

It's unclear about what picture he wouldn't mind get a parking fine for.

*Nick took the memory cards out of the digital cameras he had used and
as he booted up his laptop there was a knock on the door. He put his
lunch tray down next to the laptop and settled down to eat and work.*

First there was a knock on his door, then he's putting his lunch tray down. I can appreciate that you don't want to write every little action, because it's not necessary but more is needed here for clarity. It's not clear to the reader that the lunch tray came from the knock at the door. I had to read this passage several times before I went back further to be reminded he ordered food. Just a small line such as 'there was a knock at the door, that meant lunch had arrived. He put his tray next to his laptop...' It's a very small thing to greatly improve the smooth flow for the reader.

A smart and really nice looking woman in a black suit and white blouse walked in, followed by a WPC who put two drinks down on the table, one for Hall and one for the woman. She looked to be in her mid-thirties, with very short black hair, slightly dark skin and piercing black eyes.

This makes it appear as though the WPC is being described. Also, 'really' tends to be a filler word. If you remove it, you'll have a sharper sentence.

Nick guessed there was some Asian blood somewhere in her background and, if he knew her better.

Maybe you didn't finish your thought here but not sure what it's meant by 'if he knew her better'.

Dialogue

For the most part the dialogue is excellent. You use it to convey information and personality without it becoming too stilted or an info dump. However, there is still room for improvement. There are some sections where the dialogue is stiff and formal when that's not how you set the character up to be. Some dialogue is completely unnecessary. For instance, the character says they're going to do something and then does the thing. It would be better if the character just did the thing without announcing their intentions.

These are examples of dialogue that worked. It shows personality for the character, it helps show the relationship between characters and it flows naturally:

"Sure are pal, guests set 'em off sometimes trying to nip out through one of 'em for a ciggie. Fookin' great sign on the door tells 'em it's alarmed, but the daft bastards ignore it."

"Don't you worry," replied Nick as he opened up the laptop, "I'll be very pleased to get pissed at your expense!"

The following dialogue comes across as stiff and unnatural. It's a long paragraph and can be shortened between back and forth conversation with Emma and Nick:

"When I found out that I had a sister but that she was dead I almost felt as is if I had been robbed or even raped; I felt to so violated. I had found his sister, the one I'd been almost sure existed for such a long time and my moment of pure joy lasted less than a fraction of a second before my brain told me that this sister was dead. Not just dead though, but murdered in a most horrible and sadistic manner. It was almost as if I could feel her pain and suffering two years after it happened."

(Also of note are the typos. While this is something you want to work on with your editor I did notice a lot of typos and missing words)

One quirk I noticed in your dialogue was that across most characters they tended to have the same phrase handy. It's some variation of 'should I call it', 'shall I call it', 'or should I say'. You definitely need to cut those down and reduce it to one character:

"...the same person in some very, how shall I say it, less pleasant surroundings."

"...have persuaded him that you have something ... err ... shall I say delicate but critically important to tell him."

"...he might one day get shanked as they call it..."

"Yes Peter, I'm sure he is, but let's get back to the, can I call it, Merrick episode."

"Nick knows Emma that I am not, as you would probably call it, a law enforcement officer now,"

"So what did you think of Emma's article or perhaps, a briefing you might call it."

These are just a few examples. Doing a word search on variations I came up with fifteen different incidences in which a character uses it. It doesn't sound like a lot but it began to really stand out after so many times.

Another repetition I noticed in your dialogue was a tag. So often someone said something 'with a grin.' For a serious mystery there's an awful lot of smiling going on. I would suggest toning down the joviality a bit since there is a fair bit of danger and seriousness.

"Oh I've already got something prepared!" she replied with a grin.

... he said and she thumped him on the arm with a grin...

"But I could hire a top private detective who could do it," she replied with a grin.

"Piece of piss according to Frank!" he said with a grin.

"I presume that's some expression to mean easy?" she said with a grin.

*“So that means we’re now free to go after McDonald then?” she replied
with a grin.*

There are sixty eight occurrences on variations of ‘with a grin’, ‘grinning’ or ‘grinned’. It feels like everyone is walking around with a goofy grin on their face.

Characters

Nick is your main character. I get a pretty good sense of him through his interactions with Charlie, Brian Hall, and Emma. There's a fair bit of exposition that portrays Nick as a smart guy. Plenty of descriptions of hangovers and drinking so I know he likes his beer. However, he really could use some filling out. He's not completely flat but he could be more dynamic through some tweaks. Although there is some very slight description of him, you should add a bit more and fill it in through his experiences at the beginning with Charlie.

Charlie comes across as merely serving a purpose. While his initial introduction is pretty colorful and does an interesting job:

"Well here he is, the man with the magic lens!" said Charlie Bentley as he held out a fat hand. For some reason Charlie always tried to look like a cool biker, with leather jacket and big boots, but he was too short and overweight and his greying and thinning hair was too long for his age and round face. At 47 he was nine years older than Nick, who was tall and slim with a narrow face and a somewhat wild shock of still black hair. Someone once said that when they stood together they looked a basketball and baseball bat side-by-side on a toy shelf.

"That's me!" said Nick as they shook hands and then Charlie passed Nick his pint and they went to find a table.

"So you'd better have something half decent for me, or all the beers are on you tonight young Nicholas!"

"Don't you worry," replied Nick as he opened up the laptop, "I'll be very pleased to get pissed at your expense!"

After this he seems flat. It's a lot of drinking with Nick. You don't need to punch it up a whole lot, just add a little color. It appears that Nick and Charlie are good buds. They're relationship comes through well and Charlie seems like a likeable and trustworthy guy.

Emma is the next stand out character. I think you've done a good job with her. She has her own way of speaking. When she began to speak I knew it was her right away. She was described several times in different ways so it was easy to imagine her. I don't think you need to do much more if anything with her. I

might like to see her angry once or twice because she's very good natured throughout the whole book. There's so much going on a little more range of emotion would add to her depth.

There is one issue I came across between Nick and Emma. As they are investigating they congratulate each other on their 'devious' ideas and laugh a lot at stuff like 'you sneaky sonofabitch'. A little bit is okay but there's so much of it. I would suggest toning it down because they are investigating the real murderer of her sister. Sometimes it seems like the mood is a little too light.

Brian Hall is the last stand out character. The interaction between him and Nick works. Hall has his reservations about getting involved but when he does its believable. The back and forth conversation between Nick and Hall is sometimes fun and light but it becomes serious when it needs to be.

How did it come about that McDonald would be the murderer? And why did it have to be so brutal? Is that brutality part of his personality? I didn't pick up on that at all. The graphic nature of the murder seemed gratuitous. She could have been shot in the head, thrown off a building, tossed in front of a bus etc. and it wouldn't change the story. I have a hard time believing that McDonald would be so brutal with the murder.

American Info

This section will address two items. The first one, as an American reader, was I able to follow the story. The second being, does the America character come off as believable.

You might be surprised about the things that tripped me up while reading. The political aspect of the story was easy to follow. While I didn't understand everything perfectly, it's explained well enough and easy to understand in context.

Emma is believable for the most part but there are some minor things I came across that you might want to consider changing. However, I did take into consideration that her parents are British and she may have picked up some things from them while growing up.

The following is a list of some of the items that tripped me up:

"Well it's like ... When I saw the piece about Sharon getting murdered I checked most of the UK press for that the time and learnt..." An American would say 'learned' rather than 'learnt'.

Nick's Barbour. I had no idea what that was. I had to look it up. When I did it made sense.

You kept referring to the Chief Constable as the CC in exposition. Not sure if that's a UK thing but I had to stop and think about it every time I came across CC.

One minor character is named Rob Lowe. In America that's the name of a celebrity and I couldn't help but think of him.

Ron, the landlord of the Hare and the Hound is described as having a Northern accent. An American reader wouldn't know the difference between a northern accent and the accent of the current location.

Once Charlie had gone he went to make himself another coffee. As he waited for the kettle he thought again as to why Sharon's sister... This one baffled me. I couldn't understand why he was putting a kettle on for coffee. I actually ended up looking this up and I can only glean that he's drinking instant coffee. Most Americans drink freshly brewed coffee. Like I said, it was very minor things that tripped me up!

Emma speaking: *the bit she was concerned about was where I'd spelt 'favourite and colour' with the British spellings!*" An American is more likely to say 'part' rather than 'bit'. And 'spelled' rather than 'spelt'.

Serviced apartments. I have no idea what those are.

"But are you sure they won't follow us? They must know your car's registration." In America a car's registration is a little card that is kept in the glove compartment. I think she might be talking about the license plate but I'm not sure. Since this is Emma talking, it might be better for her to say something like 'They must recognize your car.'

Emma speaking: *"An email from Peter Barker! Now he must be keen to be in the press replying already!"* Americans don't really use 'keen' in this way and she used it several times.

"So this is your first fish and chips Emma?" asked Brian. Fish and chips is actually pretty popular in America. Especially since she has British parents it's hard for me to believe she hasn't already had fish and chips. It might be her first British fish and chips, which seems worth noting.

The sat nav. In America we say GPS. Another one I had to look up.

"Well thank you kind Sir," said Emma as reached the coffee he brought her in the morning. Like I said, Americans mostly drink freshly brewed coffee. I feel like Emma might complain about having instant coffee.

Emma speaking: *"...probably as a means to launder his drugs money..."* An American wouldn't pluralize 'drugs'. She would probably say 'drug money'.

She was gagged with a piece of wide brown tape as is usually used by removal companies to secure cardboard cartons. America doesn't have 'removal companies' so I wasn't sure what it was. I didn't look this one up but I came to the conclusion that it was a moving company. But I thought also it might be like a garbage truck.

This isn't everything but it gives you a pretty good idea of the kind of things that took me out of the story, in which I had to stop and ponder for a second. You can see how tiny each one thing is. Some items were just a fraction of a second that caused me to trip and others caused me to run to google to look them up. It's up to you how much you want to change for an American reader.

Conclusion

I found the book to be a page turner. With your short chapters making for each one a quick read, and where you ended them were spot on, I just had to know what happened next. With that said the book does come through a bit on the flat side, like you're following a prescribed set of steps with little wiggle room for a strong sense of character and voice. Fortunately, with some tweaks here and there as I've mentioned above you can achieve that. The plot is there and it's a sturdy one.

There are continuity problems as I've mentioned. Be aware of this when you're writing. Fill out Nick, Emma, Charlie and Hall a little. They don't need a lot more to make them dynamic. Avoid long clunky dialogue. Tone down the 'happiness' and dial up the seriousness. Remember to chop away a portion of your 'grin' tags. Fine tune your dialogue so every character isn't saying 'or should I say,' or some variation thereof. If McDonald is to be believed as the sadistic killer find a way to incorporate that into his personality. Fill out our scenes and slow them down so the ending doesn't feel rushed.

I hope this report isn't too negative. You have a lot work with here and with hard work during editing you can bring your manuscript to the next level.