Contact v1 Feedback

**Contact Notes - 7.25**

“Start fast, finish slow”

Ray Bradbury - All Summer In A Day

What’s Working

* Interesting take on star-crossed lovers
* Solid stakes and basis
* Lots of tenderness and care with young characters - a lot of connection from the author toward their emotions and feelings
* Opposite nature of families stood out - good potential for conflict, interest
* Good rising action and tension, clear rise and arc
* Well-told child/teenage perspective - feels authentic
* Seed of connection planted early and effectively
* Liked parallel with Egyptian myth
* Tonally solid throughout

What to Improve

* Understanding more of who is talking right up front - envision narrator sooner allows for more connection
* A little information-heavy on the first page - maybe just dive into the first scene instead of giving background
	+ Information given through Elinor’s perspective rather than detached academia
* First paragraph could be cut
	+ Feels pretty academic/scientific - maybe more embedded than first-thing
	+ Alternately, it sets up horror/Gothic turn on reality - but maybe needs to move more quickly
	+ Different points to start, rather than meeting?
* Metaphor of electricity felt a bit cliche
* Description of Elinor’s appearance - is she white?
* Transition from children to high school is fast - more time in their relationship when they’re young before they age
	+ Would they really go all the way through high school without getting together?
* Curious about outside world - piece feels very insular, focused on just these two
	+ Pop culture and romance?
	+ How does media from before the pandemic feel different?
* Relationship between Elinor and her parents - develop?
	+ Scene rather than narration
	+ Portray Elijah’s siblings on the page?
	+ Elinor is convinced that her parents don’t care - when they appear in scene, maybe the reality is different than her image of it? Need to see them to believe what Elinor is saying
* Realism of science - if it’s genetic, could it actually be a pandemic?
	+ Maybe the science isn’t understood? Might enhance the fear factor if these people DON’T understand. Trust the reader to understand the scientific problems without being hand-held or walked through
	+ Rather than story being longitudinal, maybe zero in on the moment of understanding/realization and heighten the emotion
	+ Cycles of misinformation and individual anxieties
	+ Feel free to free yourself from bounds of literal pandemic - just take what fragments work
	+ Chronic medical conditions and the isolation that accompanies it, especially if the world isn’t acknowledging it as a real affliction
* Mythology vs. science - which one prevails in this story?
* More of the Gothic voice throughout the story
* Why does she decide to flee? To where? More tension about their existence together and how running away might be against the rules, etc.
	+ Decision to leave felt pretty light and easy, given that she’s risking not only herself but someone she loves
	+ Work in foreshadowing of this departure sooner - disconnect with parents, commitment to Elijah
	+ Break out of laboratory sequence - sequestered, physically not allowed to see each other? Crossing some line that represents the point of no return
	+ Is the decision to leave going to stick? Is it a permanent one?
* Want to see the deaths play out on the page?
* Letter at the end - feels passive rather than active
	+ Voice of letter didn’t feel like a teenager - if that’s going to be his voice, it needs to be shown sooner
* Maybe dial back Egyptian myth?
* Emotional intensity and stakes can continue to be increased
	+ Is there any conflict that happens between the two characters, any disparity in their relationship?
	+ Intensify time frame? Shorten flashbacks, heighten and compress time frame?
	+ Lean into Gothic/horror aspects of the story

Thank you Zoë! Your comments are very helpful!!

I am including my notes below. I really liked your story, the writing, the idea, and everything!

Thanks!

Yoshi

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I thought this was a fabulous story!! I printed it early in the week and was intending to read the first half during one sitting (because of other stuff that I needed to do that morning), but ended up not being able to put it down and read the whole thing. Super great! I really liked the premise, the characters, the message, the connection to current issues and so on.

\* So many +1s in my head as I read. Regarding the writing, wow, so descriptive and visual -- awesome! I liked the cleverness of many parts of your story too. I mentioned on the call that I liked how the car was described as a ship both at the beginning of the story and in the letter toward the end (by both characters). As another example that I highlighted: I liked how you described how she liked having her birthday being after his, so that she could base the present she got him on the present he got her. I liked how you said that Elija's silence was a choice, not a shield. I liked the commentary on page 12, about how many people saw the research as a scheme by scientists -- that seems like a very timely comment in today's world as well. I liked on page 13 how you said "we had years of practice keeping our distance". I liked on page 15 how new results continued to emerge over time. On page 19, I love the words "I wrapped my choice around me like a blanket." I also liked the "it was thousands of little choices" -- it reminds me of the old expression "death by a thousand cuts".

\* I like the physical spark idea so much. I found that paragraph on the top of page 4 very interesting.

\* I kind of felt like her parents were characters in the book. Even if they didn't talk or we didn't see them, we saw light coming from their studies. That gave them a sense of presence ... but also solidified to me their detachment from Elinor.

\* For me, I found some of the comments by other participants, about the science and pheromones, to be interesting. To me, I thought the science was fine. I think Jesse used the word "magical realism". While it is true that I didn't know if the science was actually real, I found it believable enough. Though perhaps I have seen enough X-Men and so on superhero movies to know that (in the movies) surprising things are always being found re: genetics. One related concept might be cystic fibrosis -- as I understand it, people with cystic fibrosis should never physically interact with other patients with cystic fibrosis. I don't really know the reason, but I think it might have something to do with how different strains of infection can interact in deadly ways with cystic fibrosis patients.

\* For me, I also liked the direct, more sciency first paragraph of the whole story. But I understand that other people might prefer jumping straight into a scene.

\* Regarding the letter, I personally liked the idea of him writing a letter. One reason: it can be easier to say things via letter than in person. In a letter, one can refine their ideas, re-write the ideas so many times, and so on.

\* I definitely knew that both characters were experiencing the symptoms. I know this was brought up, so I thought I'd comment on the fact that I thought that was clear from the writing that Elija was also having symptoms.

\* I am really curious why she took her mythology book with her! I liked being left with that thought to think about.

Hi Zoë,

Thanks for an intriguing read! I cared deeply about these star-crossed lovers from the beginning. Here is my feedback in written form.

What Worked

I loved meeting Elinor and getting a sense of this wounded little bird thrilling at the prospect of a true friendship.

Elinor's voice is clear and tonally consistent throughout.

The seed of their extraordinary connection is planted early and effectively.

I loved the Egyptian myth parallel with Elinor's own forbidden love. Consider omitting the passage where you spell this out for the reader and trust them to get it on their own (I did).

Questions

As discussed, consider reworking the opening to put us directly into scene and character. The scientific explanations could be embedded in the piece or related through Elinor's perspective.

If you are going to name Elijah's skin color, consider naming Elinor's.

Is a letter the best way for Elijah to tell Elinor how he feels? Maybe it occurs through action instead.

Play up the aspect of the greater public not really believing this is a real ailment. What is that like for Elinor who is experiencing acute symptoms?

Ending: need more on parents and aftermath of the decision to flee.

Thanks again, and see you next week!

Kate

Hi Zoë,

It was fun discussing your story in class yesterday -- I hope you got some useful feedback. I've written some comments below, and attached the word document with my marginal notes. Let me know if you have trouble seeing them, or if you have any other questions.

I look forward to reading the next version!

Best,

Jesse

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CONTACT

This is a wonderful story! Your writing is so crisp, without sacrificing texture and character. And your take on the trope of “star-crossed lovers” is fresh and interesting. It was a real pleasure to read.

Here are a few questions/comments to consider as you move forward with your revision:

—Consider starting a little faster (by eliminating the move-in scene, for instance—which is the true starting point of their friendship, but not necessarily the best place to start a narrative account of it). As others mentioned in our discussion yesterday, you might consider radically compressing the time frame and see what that does to the story -- it may give it a nice injection of urgency.

—Regarding your science: I was willing to suspend disbelief and go with the story’s premise—though it did feel, at least initially, more like magical realism than hard science fiction (which is totally fine!). I think the fact that the phenomenon you describe is so specific makes it work. That said, I think you can cut most of the direct quotes from scientific journals. Let your characters and their actions tell us what we need to know.

—Relatedly: the way your characters learn about what’s going on in the world (through the journals/news/etc.) feels a little too \*passive\* (and a little too convenient as well). Can you force them to be more active in their pursuit of that knowledge. What kinds of risks might this compel them to take?

—As for the climax/denouement—it feels a little rushed (which is typical of a draft!). Can you do more to intensify the drama of Elinor’s choice, or the stakes of that final decision? And is a letter the best way for Elijah to express his desire to be with Elinor? (To me, it seems to siphon some of the drama out of the closing sequence.) Think about ways of ratcheting up the stakes in the final movements. (For example: what if Elijah decided that he couldn’t take it and fled, and Elinor had to pursue him? Or vice versa? What else might grip your reader as you move toward the story’s conclusion?)

—Elinor’s parents are a problem! In this version, they are, at best, made out of cardboard (but maybe only tissue paper). If you brought at least one of them to life, and developed a bond between him/her/them and Elinor, then Elinor’s decision to leave the home (and essentially kill herself) could be a lot more wrenching.