

Hey <name redacted>!

You've done a LOT of amazing work on developing the plot over the past year and a half. WELL DONE.

I'm liking the added point of view (Maeve - though I have feedback below on the two POVs). The development of how M ends up in the woods, her relationship with her father, the mystery of how the journals arrive (on M's side) and where they are, then what they contain (on Maeve's side) are all very compelling.

The creepiness of the fantasy world is still in full force, and I love it. It's taken up a bunch of notches when M is then trapped in her past self and dies in the cave - the fact that there is no happy ending for her is powerful, though I feel strongly that we need a little bit more payoff at the end (notes on this below).

Overall, I like the addition of Ick - he adds levity to an otherwise darker book, but I think his character needs to be used more intentionally (notes below).

The mystery of Maeve's maternal line inheriting the house and being caretakers of the woods is really interesting, as is the ultimate betrayal by Maeve's grandmother. That said, I want to see more development of this storyline because I don't fully understand it. For example: I don't understand what's true and what's not... ARE the woods malevolent? They certainly take over M. What is the caretaker's role? Has Maeve's grandmother taken advantage of the role in some way? Why did she want to kill her own grandchildren? How will Maeve be a different type of caretaker and how will that change things in the fantasy world?

My two biggest points of feedback are around the structure of the two points of view (Maeve as a narrator and M's journal), and clarity of what's happening (there were many times as a reader that I was really confused).

**Regarding the structure of the two points of view:** switching back and forth between Maeve and M's stories is, overall, working. As a reader I liked the differences between what they were experiencing - Maeve is in the regular world trying to untangle a mystery and M is moving through this dreamlike dark fantasy landscape where there are monsters and crazy shit happening all the time.

However, I don't think that structuring M's sections as a journal is working - for two reasons. First, it isn't written like a journal at all. It's written like she's experiencing everything as it's happening. Have you read *The Thursday Murder Club*? It's a mystery series. Most of those books are told in an omniscient third person POV, but there are several sections that are journal entries from one character. They work because they feel like she is actually writing in a journal, and the reader gets from those sections not the feeling of a scene (where events are actually happening), but the character's filtered reflections on what has happened.

In any case, as a reader I just didn't believe that M's sections were a journal. They don't read like a journal at all.

Second, for most of the book Maeve is not reacting to what she has read in M's journals. In fact, most of the time (until the very very end), it felt like I was reading a book with two totally separate POVs. I didn't see Maeve asking questions about what had happened or using the information she had read to change her behavior or her thinking about what happened to M. She found the top, but then didn't seem surprised or seem to connect it to what she'd read in M's journals at all.

There are two options that I can see: one is to keep the bulk of the writing as it is, but have M be experiencing what she's experiencing (rather than communicating through the journal), and Maeve is searching for her friend. You'd have to find another way of transmitting information from M to Maeve. Perhaps dreams? Or even physical clues that she finds and when she touches them she can feel what M was experiencing? Or even - maybe she finds the journal and there's a very short entry on a given day but Maeve can touch the page and experience what M was experiencing, which gives us the narrative style you currently have for M. If you do this, there needs to be much more interaction on Maeve's side. Right now it feels very repetitive for her to escape to these side places and then say, "Then I sit down to read." And then when we come back to her she doesn't comment on or ask questions or have emotions about what she's read. I found that very strange.

Another option is to rewrite M's sections to be more like journal entries, but I don't like this option as much. It would mean more rewriting, and also I like the immediacy of the narration we have. But it's because of the immediacy that it doesn't feel like journal entries, which are by nature more removed.

Another thing to consider is that Maeve's and M's voices sound quite similar. The main thing that differentiates them is what's happening. If you plopped M down in Maeve's life, I don't think I'd be able to distinguish them by their voice. An easy fix for this might be to put one of them in third person (probably Maeve). This would also help distinguish them as characters because sometimes, to answer your question, I did get M and Maeve mixed up because of the M's. But if you had one in first person and one in third, it would be easier to tell them apart.

Also - consider that you can have two POVs but not necessarily change between them on every chapter. I think for example you could easily have two M chapters in a row.

**Regarding clarity of how things unfold** - there were many times that I stopped to reread a section, or wrote in the margin, Wait, I'm confused, or Wait, what?

Here are just a few instances where I didn't understand what was happening:

→ On page 107 when M is put in the cave. The third paragraph that begins on that page:

"A coolness sinks to my bones and a heaviness sits on my chest. My breath becomes ragged. All the warmth and joy drain from my body. I grind my teeth. I quickly settle myself in my throne and await his entry to my lair. I don't see him. He's a shadow on the wall. He utters, "I'm glad you've made yourself at home."

I was like, what throne, who is "he," how does she know "he" is coming, how does she know who she's pretending to be... Later on that page it says "His powers amplify like he's choking me..." And I was like, what powers? Who is this guy? Why does he have powers? What are we talking about?? Most of this chapter was really confusing. I also still don't understand how M ended up going from facing her darkest fear (which was very compelling!) to turning into a past self. Was that someone's goal all along? Was that why she was lured into the woods?

→ Here are a few questions I still have:

- ◆ Who *did* drop off journals to M? Did someone lure her into the woods on purpose?
- ◆ If Maeve's family is the caretaker of the woods why are the woods trying to hurt M? Why are they suddenly friendly in the end? What is Grandma's aim / end game?
- ◆ How do Illi and Herata fit into the story? I feel really hazy on their roles. What happens to them in the end?
- ◆ What happens to Ick? What is Ick's role in the story?

In a lot of the action moments, I think the confusion can be addressed by slowing down. Really describe what's happening, who's doing what, where bodies are in space. I know that you want the fast-paced thriller vibe, but try slowing down for clarity of what's happening and then looking for places where you can speed up the action. I love thrillers too - but think about how a lot of authors can make a climactic scene last for *pages and pages*. Weirdly, that precision of action, even when it takes more words, often gives the illusion of a fast pace.

## Pacing

There are several scenes (and some dialogue exchanges) that don't accomplish a lot, while there are other moments where we seem to skip over the most interesting part or in some places, multiple crazy things happen in very quick succession without slowing down to let the reader understand what's going on. This is just a pacing issue.

Scenes should either move the plot forward, or reveal character (or both). There are a few that feel like they don't quite accomplish either. the whole interlude at Maeve's uncle's cabin doesn't do a lot (I'm unclear on why she has to go there in the first place). But in the chapter starting on p44, Maeve comes home, texts her brother about Mr. Fluffy (which happens again when her mom is looking for him in the storage area - that felt repetitive), goes home to her parents' house and eats lunch, and talks to her mom about not very much. This whole chapter could use some more excitement - either it could be used to reveal more of Maeve's character and where she comes from, or do something to move the plot along. (Or be cut. ;)

There's a lot of dialogue (more detailed notes on dialogue below) that is two characters just chatting. It doesn't reveal their relationship, or give us backstory, or advance the plot. All of those sections can probably be cut as fluff.

In other places, we seem to skip over the most interesting part. For example, we get a lot of Maeve and Ick just hanging out, but we completely skip over the several months surrounding M's disappearance. This is one of the most dramatic points of the book - I really think you can spend more time there before you skip ahead.

And as I said above, the current structure that's requiring Maeve to do something and then sit down and read M's journal to "escape" isn't quite working - it slows down Maeve's storyline, and it feels repetitive.

### **Rules of the fantasy world**

Every fantasy world and every system of magic needs rules. Right now, to answer your question, I don't fully understand the rules of the world you've created.

- Who are the Hunters and who do they work for at the beginning? (This seems to shift over time? They were chasing Illi but then she's in charge of them?) How do they hunt people down? What is their aim?
- What are the rules about how space seems to shift and change? Do those rules change if someone throws the top?
- I don't understand at all Herata's or even Illi's roles in this world. Illi inherits it in the end?

### **Ick**

My sense is that Ick is not serving his full purpose! I was confused by how he keeps showing up everywhere that Maeve is. There's sexual tension there that ultimately doesn't go anywhere (I wanted it to go somewhere!!), and after she tells him never to go into the woods (then finds out the woods were benign all along...??) the reader never encounters him again.

Again, I think there's two options here: to cut his character out entirely, or to do *more* with him.

I do like that he's sort of a bridge between M and Maeve. He's an ally to Maeve when everyone in her life thinks she should "move on" (why do they think that? Is it really so believable that M would disappear from her life?). He's also a bit of a lighter character in an otherwise fairly dark story, so he does provide levity.

There's a lot of drama and backstory with Ick but it isn't clearly drawn. By that I mean that I understand he and M eloped but I have absolutely no idea why they did that, and I don't fully understand why Maeve is so angry. Especially because she seems more angry at him than M, and didn't they both do it? I know there's something about Ick's father having a stroke and Maeve being there for his family? But I didn't understand the references to it. I also didn't

understand how Maeve suddenly forgave Ick at the beginning of the story, and then that they went from not talking at all for years to Ick showing up everywhere. There's also this interesting thing that could deserve more exploration - that Maeve was there for Ick's family, but *he* is also showing up for *her* grandma and she doesn't even know.

That said, I would think twice about having Ick know about Maeve's mom's cancer. That didn't feel right. It just seems weird that he's trying to restart this "friendship" with her and he's keeping this gigantic secret about her mom.

Speaking of friendship, I could tell that Maeve was starting to like him, or at least have some sexual feelings towards him, and wasn't sure what or why she was feeling what she was. That felt believable to me. But at no point was I clear on what *Ick* is feeling about her.

If you decide to keep his character in there, you need to understand where his character ends up - on his own, and in relation to Maeve. Does he have any part in the climax? What's he doing with his life? Does he believe M has left after her disappearance? (This doesn't seem to affect him emotionally?) Does this belief change over time - i.e. does he believe after Maeve's experience that M is dead? Do they stay friends, become lovers, become estranged? etc.

### **Emotional Arcs**

Speaking of endings...let's talk about the main characters' emotional arcs, and where they end up.

There's a lot of *plot* that happens - things happen to both characters, they uncover more about the secrets that have been kept and the woods and this strange adjacent world.

But as a reader I'm craving a more nuanced inner journey, as well. I don't yet have a good sense of their emotional / inner journeys: what they're thinking and feeling throughout the book and how their identity is changed by everything that happens. My sense is that you as the author have a better sense of this than what is currently on the page.

What is M's journey? Did she die completely in vain, alone and forgotten? Can we see what impact her histories have on the world in some way?

One of the most stunning sections of the book is when M faces her fear - she comes across her younger self hiding in the bedroom, and then spirals back to that moment when she's at the play table and her father injures her. There is so much naked emotion in that scene. It was breathtaking. I want more of this!!

That scene is also a great example of a point of feedback about action - I want you to practice slowing down the action so that the reader can really visualize it. There were just a few small moments in this scene where I wasn't clear about the action that was happening - I made a lot of notes on page 103.

What is MAEVE's emotional journey? How does she grow and change? What did she believe at the beginning of the book? What does she believe now? I was just thinking about the beginning and how she's a high-powered lawyer, and that analytical, more formal / buttoned-up self seems to totally dissipate. She seems very young (I mean, she is). I'd like to see that young self bumping up against this more emergent self, more often.

I can get on board with an unhappy ending for M - I think it's kind of cool that she doesn't get to escape. (Cool in a chilling, scary way.) But then piling on both that Maeve's mom dies *and* that Maeve literally loses her voice felt like too much loss, in the end. Her deciding to write doesn't feel like enough payoff.

Here are some possible ideas for giving the reader payoff at the end:

- Maybe Maeve changes careers from being a lawyer to being an author (or a researcher), and publishes stories from the woman in the cave
- Maybe Maeve honors M's sacrifice in some other way. Maybe she uses her voice to advocate for women's rights, for example, honoring her training as a lawyer.
- Maybe Maeve becomes the caretaker of the woods and in some way honors M's sacrifice doing that. Making the woods a good place again?

Overall, I want more time at the end. There's a trend right now for a lot of books, especially if they're fantasy and/or action, to not have a long denouement, and I hate that trend! Lol. I'd like to see maybe an epilogue or an additional chapter that's long after this adventure, after Maeve being stuck in the hospital, that shows her maybe happy or at least meaningfully engaged in her work / life. That she's changed in some way beyond just one line that she's been writing. This could also be a place to bring Ick back in, if they end up getting together, or even if they're just friends honor M's legacy.

There's also currently no resolution with the journals in the other language / Dr. Z. I still don't understand what language they were written in or what was in those journals.

## Dialogue

I agree that the dialogue feels stilted. I have a bunch of notes for you on this.

- First: ask yourself the purpose of any given conversation. Is it moving the action forward? Is it providing exposition or backstory? Is it revealing character, or providing levity? Or are the characters just 'shooting the shit' - just chatting?
- I found myself confused almost all the time about who was speaking - you aren't using enough dialogue "tags," which tell us "Maeve said" or "Ick said." If there are three people talking, we need tags on almost every line. Or, if you don't want to use tags, you can give us a character's gesture or action and then their words on the same line - that will tell us who's speaking. If there are two people talking, give us "I said" and "Ick said" and then you can go 3-4 lines back and forth without telling us who said what.
- I strongly recommend only using "said" in dialogue tags. It makes the dialogue tags almost disappear. When you use other words like asked, replied, inquired, etc. (not that you're doing that), it draws more attention to them.

- In terms of paragraphing dialogue: start a new paragraph every time someone new speaks. And if Ick says something, but then Maeve moves or does something, her action should be in a different paragraph than his dialogue. In that way, paragraphing also indicates to us that a different person is speaking / acting.
- Speaking of people moving / doing things - that's a big thing that your dialogue is missing. Right now a lot of the dialogue is just straight dialogue - almost like a play. Remember the tool from the mastermind about "laying down tracks." In any section of dialogue that you're keeping, ask yourself:
  - Where are the characters' bodies in space?
  - What gestures are they making? What is their body language saying?
  - What is the narrator thinking? Is it different than what they're saying? (You do a good job of showing this in the scenes where M is first in the woods and is really confused - we get what she's thinking. I see this less elsewhere and definitely less with Maeve.)
  - Where are they having this conversation? One of my professors used to say that so much of her students' dialogue (including mine) was like talking heads in a white space - that she had no idea where they were having a conversation or what the setting looked like. You do this in some scenes but not at all in others.
  - We don't need every single one of these items in every conversation, but you definitely want at least two of them to ground the dialogue.

I edited a page and a half of dialogue in the manuscript on pages 9 and 10: <redacted>

### **Beginning**

You asked in your submission about the beginning. The hangout at M's house, and how she's trying to reconcile Ick and Maeve, feels a bit contrived. Also, I'm still unclear why Maeve is still SO mad, and why Ick and M got married in the first place. How long has it been? Maeve seems really angry but then she seems to agree just to drop it because M wants her to, which doesn't feel believable. And the part where M pours water on them seems really random.

I don't know that this is the best entry point for this book. I don't have a different answer but I think it will become clear as you work on the next set of revisions.

### **Length**

To answer your question from your submission, it does feel short. The story feels a little thin. I know you said you slashed a lot to hone in on the essence of the story. It doesn't feel totally in focus yet. I don't think it's a matter of starting over (unless that's easier for you), but rather adjusting dials like focusing binoculars. See below for where to start adjusting.

### **Next Steps**

Write a reverse outline of *The Hazel Wood*. What do you notice? What do you like about the story arc? What don't you like?

Next, write a reverse outline for your current draft (if you don't already have an outline).

Here's what I recommend focusing on at a high level first:

Consider:

- What is Ick's role in the book? Right now his relationship with M and with Maeve is totally separate from the main plot of the book. Is there any way to twine it in / integrate it? Then consider where his and Maeve's relationship ends up - even if it doesn't have a happy ending, we need some resolution / payoff there.
- Maeve's emotional growth / character arc. Where does she start, where is she in the middle, where is she in the end? She never seems to have a crisis of faith, really, even though her best friend is missing. Her character feels very cerebral - she's very in her head. How can you show more of her emotions on the page?
- Clarify the grandma storyline. I thought for a while that the grandma stuff was just a distraction. Even though you mention the weird day in the woods for the tea party, it seems very low stakes because as a reader we don't know that that's going to have such a deep connection to the main mystery. Make it clearer from the outset that something's weird about grandma / her land and that Maeve is convinced it's connected to M's disappearance.
- Decide on the POVs - if they'll be more separated and Maeve will get filled in via another route, or if you'll use magical means to have Maeve "experience" what M has experienced.
- Get clearer on Herata and Illi and their role in the story - or if you feel clear, maybe talk through it with someone and figure out how to bring that clarity to the page. Their roles and how they're connected to M and to the fantasy world still feel really confusing to me.
- Once you clarify some of these pieces, start asking yourself: is this particular scene the best one to illustrate this next part of this character's journey? What's at stake in this scene? How can I ramp up the stakes? How can I go deeper into each character's psyche / emotional journey?