

Dear [redacted],

Thank you for sharing [redacted] with me. Your story is intriguing and entices the reader on every page. The fact that your personal background is woven into elements of the story makes it unique and heartfelt. I particularly enjoyed Charles' character and his relationships with Mikey and his mother. Charles' vulnerability with Mikey, yet tough exterior with his mother, was raw and revealed intergenerational love and conflict that many readers can relate to. Specifically, I enjoyed the moments when Mikey and Charles would share candy or drink from the soda fountains at gas station stores. Those moments highlighted their youth and mischievousness, which I enjoyed. On the other hand, I appreciated Charles' rocky relationship with his mother because we saw some of his walls, and hers, break down that revealed genuine emotion.

I think you've done an excellent job with Charles' character and his development. His diction and narration style was honest and unfiltered, yet true to himself. His character captures the development of his identity from boyhood to manhood with themes like love, relationships, and religion, which I enjoyed. He is a multifaceted character who isn't afraid to challenge or question the actions of others around him, which I really enjoyed reading.

The following paragraphs are suggestions on how to strengthen and/or add a layer of depth to the story. My suggestions and other thoughts are based on my understanding of your manuscript and authorial goals. I've organized my suggestions by **Structure**, **Characters**, and **Dialogue and Writing Style**. Within those main components, I've broken them down to specific elements of what you did well with and what could be more refined.

Structure

In this section, I'll be highlighting key areas of plot holes, organization, setting, and world building. Overall, you've established the setting and conflict between characters very well. I've pointed out a few key areas that are important to the story's background and some areas I think could be expanded on to add more background information leading up to explain characters' actions.

Plot Holes

- Dad's Job: You do a great job with illustrating the dad's character to be scary and authoritative. The dad is an Army veteran, but it's not stated what he does for a living, or an idea of what he does.
 - Suggestion: This could be mentioned early on in the story, perhaps on page 5 when it's revealed that he was in the Army. What kind of job does the dad have where he can leave early or take a day off with short notice? A general idea would give clarification to the reader what kind of character the dad became after he left the Army. This tidbit could affect the time the family leaves for Corvallis and the pacing in which they pack their belongings because it would elicit fear depending on what job the dad takes on.
- Mandy's Letter: On multiple occasions, Charles refers to Mandy's letter and how he rereads it whenever he wants to cheer up. He claims that the letter contained some of the "nicest things a person has ever said" to him (16). When the contents of the letter were revealed, it was only at the end of the letter that might be considered "nice" (56).
 - Suggestion: I recommend adding more sentimental content to the letter and/or indicating what Charles found was sentimental and meaningful to him, which

readers don't see. Sentimental content from Mandy could perhaps be details of an endearing moment they shared together or what other aspects she liked about Charles. In addition, indicating what Charles felt was specifically meaningful, and why, about the letter would add depth to his character and could explain his general attitude/emotions towards girls. I suggest that this tidbit be added on page 56, after the contents of the letter are revealed to the reader.

Organization

In this section, I'll be highlighting the pacing, and timing of certain situations and events.

Pacing

- Trip back to New Orleans: I think you did a great job in setting up and introducing this section of the story. The conflict leading up to the move was skillfully laid out for the reader, but some of Charles' actions seem out of character and the scene feels rushed. Charles states that he "adopted the habits of Mikey and his sisters" because he was relieved of his navigator duties (165), but it feels out of character for him.
 - Suggestion: I think more detail of their trip back to New Orleans could be expanded on. Maybe not to the extent of the trip going to Corvallis, but Charles' character is unfiltered and disobedient at times. By expanding on the trip back, readers would be able to gain intel on Charles' thoughts, feelings, and other conflicts moving back to New Orleans. Did he still think about California or reminisce about what it could've been like? Is he still worried that their dad is going to find them? Did he think about Scarlett? Why did he not want to "deal" with anything? By incorporating more of his thoughts, it would allow for a slower pacing and add a layer of depth to Charles' character.

- Trip to Phoenix, Arizona: I appreciated the scene when Charles and Mikey drank from soda fountains at gas station stops; I think it nicely characterized their relationship. In regards to the other siblings, this section might be a good place to characterize them further.
 - Suggestion: In adding more exposition about the siblings or if Charles got into a fight with them or their mother, it would allow readers to gain intel into Charles' thoughts about his siblings. Overall, readers get glimpses of the siblings whenever Charles interacts with them. What happened to Marie's motion sickness? Did any of the other siblings feel that as well? By illustrating some of the siblings' actions, it would allow for a slower pacing and further detail about the road trip. It might also create conflict, as Jacob is in a hurry to get there on time. Similar to the comments above, I think additional exposition could be added in pages 182-183.

Sense of Time

- Packing for Corvallis: You give great detail of the whole family packing to go to Corvallis. I particularly enjoyed the emotional scene with the mother and her grandmother's piano, as well as when the mother corralled everyone to take a family picture. I think both scenes highlight their family dynamic. However, the sense of time and sequence of events is a bit questionable.
 - Suggestion: In Part I, section 5, the family wants to leave before the dad comes back from work. It isn't specified what time of day the family started packing and when they got onto the road. I think time stamping when Charles woke up (on page 5) or when the family left would aid in any confusion about time.

Setting

The fact that Charles and his family are road tripping across the U.S offers a unique setting and time for interactions and misshapen situations. Being that the main setting is during the summertime, it provides a nostalgic feeling of road trips, which I appreciated. I also appreciated that there were more complications being on the road than not; I think those instances offer a realistic account of what it's like traveling with family, especially in cramped cars. Although, I think there could be more exposition about the setting.

- Landmarks: Noticeable landmarks can be mentioned to provide detail to the setting. For instance, in Oregon, they're known for lots of green trees. On the other hand, passing Arizona and Texas, they have very flat and dry lands. The vast differences in land might be a small detail, but it can make a big impact on the reader and them experiencing the road trip through Charles.
 - Suggestion: We see one instance on page 119, "the red rocks were replaced by green trees and a giant blue lake," this is great exposition that could be continued in other parts of the road trip. For instance, when they entered New Mexico in the beginning of Part 4, there could be more exposition about landscape and how Charles compares it to Georgia or any of the cities/states they've passed.

World Building

This section will highlight elements and ideas of the story that could be elevated to create a more robust world that the characters live in.

- Physical Features: I appreciated that physical features were sprinkled throughout the manuscript. It was subtle, yet effective, and nicely woven into the narrative. By further clarifying and exploring ethnic physical traits of the family, it would add a layer of depth

in how the world and other people treat him, his mother, and other siblings who inherited the “Arabian colored skin and dark hair” (23).

- Suggestion: For instance, Charles, Lauren, and their mother inherited the “Arabian skin and dark hair,” and it is assumed that the rest of the siblings inherited the dad’s features, but it is not stated. Since the family is racially mixed, how are they perceived in Georgia versus Oregon, or even Arizona? By inserting scenes where the multiple family members interact with people outside of their family, it would allow for a broader view into how they deal with “otherness.”
- Family’s Ethnic Background: With the mother being half-Lebanese, the story does well to brush on the topic of “otherness” that I can’t help but become more curious and want more on the subject. I think that diving into Charles’s family background would provide additional depth into their family situation. Charles comments that their grandfather doesn’t like them because their mother is half-Lebanese (23), but that’s the extent of it. I think it would be worth exploring their ethnic background.
 - Suggestion: Readers don’t get to see the grandfather physically appear in the story, but we still see Charles’ interactions with him from his point of view. It would be interesting to explore more of what Charles’ has heard what his Grandfather has to say in regards to his mother’s background. By doing so, it would allow for the topic of “otherness” to fully develop. It would also provide a perspective on how the world views the family. Scenes of this nature could be incorporated when Charles tries to disguise himself at the diner on page 107. If Charles remembers something that the Grandfather might have said to him about appearance, it would add depth to the topic of “otherness.”

- “Fragile Masculinity”: The idea of “fragile masculinity” is lightly brushed on in the story. In the first instance, Charles points out that their dad liked Jacob more than Patrick because he played sports and Patrick liked to paint and draw, and hates their dad because he chose favorites based on simple things like hobbies (19). Being the eldest siblings, and sons, there are hints of them feeling pressured to be a “man” (19). The topic of “fragile masculinity” could be explored more through Charles, especially as he grows into manhood.
 - Suggestion: I suggest integrating scenes where the idea of masculinity is being challenged. For instance, scenes of this nature could be integrated in Part 2, section 7, when Charlie is fighting with Patrick and Mar-teen after the park scene. By incorporating scenes where Charles challenges his idea of what “masculinity” is versus his dad’s idea, it could add depth to how Charles grows and his interactions with his siblings, particularly with Patrick and Jacob. Since the story details Charles’ trying to navigate adolescence into manhood, it would be interesting to integrate more scenes with Charles at vulnerable times where he questions what being a “man” is.

Characters

In this section, I’ll be focusing mainly on Charles and the mother, but also discuss Charles’ relationships with his mother and dad. Both Charles and the mother’s character were thoroughly thought out, which I appreciated. Their dialogue and mannerisms were unique to their respective characters. The suggestions I provide attempt to dive deeper into their individual backgrounds and character.

Major Characters

Charles: You did a great job with uniquely creating Charles' character. Past experiences are tastefully woven into his narrative. From his attitude to his vernacular, his character is consistent and he shows slight changes into adolescence. Although, there are small elements that could be expanded on to enhance his character development and overall plot.

- Physical Features: There is a slight confusion about which traits Charles inherited. Charles describes himself as “darker skinned,” like Lauren and his mother (10). Trixie even tells Charles that he is “kinda dark-skinned for a white boy” (111). I think integrating more of Charles' thoughts about his physical features will allow the reader to see how Charles is treated by the world.
 - Suggestion: Depending on which features Charles inherited, or a mixture of both, it can have an affect on how others treat him and how he views himself in the world. How does Charles' physical appearance affect his journey into “manhood”? Did his grandfather's words against his mother, and her children who inherited her features, bother Charles? This could come in a form of a flashback or nightmare. It could replace the nightmare on page 53 or be integrated sometime during the road trip to Arizona (164). Either way, additional exposition from Charles about his physical appearance could also speak to his confidence growing up.
- Height: Charles is described as being “just over five-feet tall” in the beginning of the story (6) and grew to be five-foot seven by the end (194). Readers don't see that growth until the end. I think height can be a good indicator of “growing up” and maturing, especially in the adolescence stage. Since the story is about Charles' journey into

manhood, I think indicating height throughout the story could serve as a symbol for growth and a maturing mindset.

- Suggestion: When Charles goes into the diner at Vega and meets Trixie. Charles is described as cleaning himself up and placing a cigarette in his mouth in order to appear older, but height is not mentioned (106-107). Would the scene look differently if he was five foot versus five foot seven? Height could also play into his character development and his confidence growing into a young man. Weaving in Charles' height into the story, as you've done with other details, can further provide depth to his character development in terms of confidence.
- Dreams: On page 53, Charles wakes up from having a bad dream about the *Batman* movie. While the dream gives a good indication to Charles' interests and age, the dream could be elevated to foreshadow events or dive deeper into Charles' worries that their dad could find them. As it stands, the indication of the nightmare may give readers false hope for a more dramatic scene.
 - Suggestion: Charles' dream could foreshadow the dad finding the family or provide a flashback of a sour interaction Charles had with his dad. By providing foreshadowing, it could add a level of suspense leading up to the doorbell incident where Charles believed their dad found them (173). On the other hand, by providing a flashback scene, it could heighten the fear Charles feels towards his dad. In either instance, the scenes would add depth to Charles' relationship with his dad and how Charles' character and emotions resulted from that relationship.

Mother: This character is nicely illustrated through Charles' POV and his interactions with her. Readers see her struggle as a single mother and her drive to give her children a better life. Her

high and low points nicely illustrate her character and her parental instincts. There are some moments where her character could shine through more.

- Grandmother's Piano: I think you do a great job highlighting how important the piano is to the mother. On the other hand, the scene could have been elevated to demonstrate further vulnerability. On page 15, we see that the mother gets emotional about having to leave the piano behind and we get a little bit of exposition from Charles about why the mother is emotional, but we don't hear anything from the mother.
 - Suggestion: It would be worth exploring snippets of comments directly from the mother about how she feels towards the piano. I'm unsure if readers are supposed to feel empathy towards the mother. To create a level of empathy for readers, there could be a flashback scene where Charles sees his mother affectionately play the piano. This could be added at the end of Part 4, Section 2, when Charles remembers having to write The Bible word-for-word. Integrating some background sounds of the mother playing the piano would provide the emotional depth the mother feels for it. By adding this tidbit in, readers might be able to create more empathy towards her character when she had to leave it behind.
- Parental Instincts: There is a moment where the mother's actions don't align to the situation. Taking under consideration that there are stressful moments and she has to think quickly at times, her parental instincts could be sharpened.
 - Suggestion: In Part 5, section 4, the mother and Jacob find the kids huddled together in the bedroom with the door closed. The mother's initial reaction was, "what are y'all doin'..." (173). Given the situation that they're running from their abusive dad, the mother's reaction to them being huddled together, plus noticing that they've been crying, is downplayed. I suggest elevating the scene quicker to

show the parental concern over the situation. By doing so, it would allow for space to illustrate the mother's character as a parental figure and guide the overall emotions of the scene. Being the survivor of an abusive relationship, this tidbit would allow for readers to sympathize with the mother and the whole situation.

- The Family Picture: This is a sweet moment where we see the mother interacting with all of her children (22). The scene is nicely illustrated and characterizes the mother as a parental figure that many readers can reflect on their own parents. While this scene is sweet, photo-taking isn't revisited and it puts into question what kind of symbolism it could've introduced to the story.
 - Suggestion: I suggest inserting a scene where the mother wants to take family pictures when they move into their new apartment (190). This would create symbolism around photo taking and add to the mother's character. It would also round out the story, having a picture of where they're from and where they ended up. Not only do the photos symbolize the moment, but themselves and their journey. By incorporating a scene like this, it would also lean into the mother's parental figure role and add sentiment to their story.

Minor Characters

Patrick: This character is illustrated nicely as the older brother who's a bully in more ways than one. His demeanor and attitude remain consistent throughout, which I appreciated. The topic of sexuality is brushed on lightly throughout the story, particularly in regards to Patrick's character, yet it is only surface deep.

- Patrick's Trauma: Since Patrick is the eldest sibling, and son, he is assumed to have grown up with certain expectations, especially from the dad. Through Charles' narration,

Patrick exhibits similar attitudes and tendencies as their dad, like anger and being physically violent. It isn't expected that Charles should know everything about his siblings, but it might help readers bridge the similarities between Patrick and the dad. This could also play into Charles' relationship with Patrick and how he views his brother like his abusive dad.

- Suggestion: Charles is very good at noticing people's movements and interactions. He noticed the looks Patrick and Mar-teen were giving to each other like they were in love (58). There could be more exposition about Patrick that explains why he acts the way he does. Through the point of view of Charles, there could be a flashback scene that includes an interaction between Patrick and the dad that Charles witnessed. Similarly to how the story of their dog, Lady, was introduced, this scene could be integrated in Part 2, Section 2, after Charles says that there will "be hell to pay" if the topic of Patrick and Mar-teen's relationship was mentioned to the mother. By integrating a scene that details Patrick and the dad's relationship, the reader will be able to see why Patrick is as temperamental and violent as he is. It would also allow for the subject of trauma to be woven into the story.

Dad: You did a great job with painting the dad as the villain. There are so many moments that show his character and villainize him. His movements and description are vivid and it's easy to envision what kind of person he is, which I appreciated.

- Anger Management Issues & Revenge: You do a great job providing small details that add to the background of elements, like the house. When Jacob, Patrick, and Charles decide to wreck the inside of the house before leaving, it truly shows the hatred they have towards their dad. One of the items that they targeted was the table their dad had made by

hand, some years ago, and liked to brag about it. Given his history of anger management problems, it doesn't seem in character for the dad to not try to seek revenge and find the family.

- Suggestion: In the scene where Charlie thinks his dad is at the door, but it's really a repair man, as Patrick points out (172), I suggest that the repairman actually turns out to be the dad. Whether the dad actually confronts the family, or not, having the repair man instead of the dad creates a sense of false fear that readers might not appreciate. By having the dad make another appearance would fit his character and offer another opportunity for Charles, and Jacob and Patrick, to face their demons and grow. But above all, not hearing or seeing the dad again seems a little fishy considering they're in Patrick's college town.

Relationships Between Characters

Charles + Mother: You did a great job with illustrating their relationship. They have good times and bad, and each one further characterizes their relationship.

- Crying in the Bathroom: The scene when Charles finds his mother crying in the bathroom, it turns into a heartfelt moment between them. We see the mother break down some of her walls and we see Charles apologizing for his attitude, which I appreciated. Although this scene is genuine, it felt like it ended too quickly.
 - Suggestion: There could be more exposition to detail the mother's relationship with the dad, continuing her saying how she didn't expect to raise her children without their father (189). Although the conversation was meant to be brief, considering it's in the middle of the night, this is an opportunity for the mother to explain what she wants for the family and how their dad is no good for them.

Charles + Dad (Ron): Charles' hate for his dad runs deep and their relationship is a testament to that. There are countless times where Charles criticizes his siblings for being like their dad in terms of being loud, assertive, or abusive in some way. While Charles criticizes, there is an assumption that he wants to be like his dad, which might confuse the reader.

- Trauma: The story does well with narrating action and how certain events went down with the dad's anger issues, no matter how dark they may be. The moments when Charles thought he was being followed (94) at the store and what Charles thought his dad found the family (173), both incidents have underlying details of Charles' trauma that was left by the dad. At the same time, Charles' trauma could be explained more.
 - Suggestion: In the scene when Charles thought he was being followed in Part 3, Section 6, it doesn't detail what happened to the man and if he walked away or if he might've been a hallucination made up by Charles. Providing more details in this scene, about the trauma Charles faced with his dad, it will give further context to their relationship and what kind of impressions were made.
- The 6-Minute Mile: On page 197, Charles runs a mile in 6 minutes and 10 seconds. He bargains with the P.E teacher to take off 11-seconds in order to get lower than 6 minutes, which was his dad's time for the mile when he was in the Army. In this scene, it can be assumed that Charles wants to prove that he's stronger than his dad. This scene feels like it's coming out of nowhere, the fact that Charles wants to prove that he's better than his dad at something. The idea of strength, or stealthiness, being associated with power and control is an interesting dynamic that is unique to their relationship that could be explored more.

- Suggestion: Since the story is about how Charles grows into adolescence, or manhood, wanting to be strong like his dad is not shocking. It becomes shocking when Charles criticizes his siblings for being like their dad and him saying he will never be like their dad. By weaving in more scenes that play with power dynamics, specifically with Charles wanting to be physically stronger, it could add more depth to Charles' relationship with his dad and what it means to be a "man." For instance, there are many times when Charles claims that he could "kick their ass if he wanted to" (69). The response seems natural, as it's coming from anger, but I suggest weaving in Charles' thoughts about growing up to be stronger and what that would mean to him. In that instance, on page 69, Charles could further detail about how he can't wait to grow stronger and why. Charles' desire to be physically stronger can open doors to illustrate his trauma and his association of power with his dad.

Conflict

The notes in this section focus on Charles' internal and external conflicts. You did a great job by exposing Charles to various elements in order to create an opposition. The challenges he experiences contribute to his overall character development and drive the story to interesting results.

- Charles vs. Patrick: There are various moments where we see the push-and-pull of their relationship. It's illustrated with genuine emotion and exposition that really highlights Charles' experiences and how horribly Patrick treated him. There are a few instances where their conflict could be rounded out to solidify a consistency with action and reaction.

- Suggestion: When Mar-teen was going to buy ice cream for the whole family, Charles decided to stay home because he didn't want to be near him, understandably. Patrick's response was to yell, grab, and try to hit Charles for not obeying him (66). That scene felt a little dramatic. Since the reader only knows a little bit about Partrick and Mar-teen's relationship, is Patrick mad that Charles is refusing Mar-teen's nice gesture to buy them ice cream? This scene could use some clarification on Patrick's part about why he's so angry. By clarifying why Patrick becomes so angry with Charles, it could provide clarification to the conflict of the situation. A small tidbit of Patrick possibly telling Charles that he should be grateful for Mar-teen's gesture might aid in the confusion. It could also be a time to amplify the conflict between Charles and Mar-teen. Charles obviously doesn't want to go, yet the mother and everyone else doesn't exactly know why and that it's related to Mar-teen.
- Charles vs. Mar-teen: The scenes between these two characters are illustrated well, even though they hold dark undertones. Their conversation is fluid, yet abrupt, which aligns with their relationship and the slight language barrier. The moments that we see between Charles and Mar-teen are brief, yet impactful. There is a moment where their relationship and power dynamic can be enhanced and go more in-depth with topics like masculinity and homosexuality. After the park incident between Charles and Mar-teen (62), Mar-teen doesn't attempt to offer an explanation about the situation. His character seems very outspoken, so it seems a bit odd that we don't hear from him.
 - Suggestion: Their relationship is a bit awkward, as it should be, but the lack of confrontation about the situation, particularly from Mar-teen, feels like the situation is side-stepped. By adding an explanation for the park scene, on page 62,

from Mar-teen, whether it's an excuse or an apology, it would allow for further discussion and conflict to happen. It would also provide an explanation to their relationship and how Charles was affected by the incident.

Dialogue & Writing Style

In this section, I will be focusing on side character dialogue and language. Overall, you do a great job with the fluid conversations and specific vernacular with characters. Just by the tone and syntax of the words, particularly with Charles, it offers a unique personification and depiction of character. Side character dialogue scenes and word choice could be improved upon to enhance scenes and their overall character.

Dialogue:

- Mrs. Reeves: This character is nicely illustrated as the mean teacher. The one interaction that we see with her and Charles is when she says, "I don't own you. You're not my slave and you don't have to call me ma'am. Actually, I'd prefer if you didn't" (199). The dialogue is brief, but says a lot about her character and the situation. Readers might be thrown off by this dialogue scene as it seems to come out of nowhere and can be seen as unprofessional as a teacher.
 - Suggestion: I suggest removing this set of dialogue, on page 199, and have her clearly state that she just doesn't like being called "ma'am" and that she might prefer "miss" or simply "Mrs. Reeves." There is a slight indication that she doesn't like to be called "ma'am" because she is "young and beautiful" and the term "ma'am" usually equates to someone who is older. The slightly problematic aspect of this dialogue piece is that the reader isn't clear about Charles' physical

features, particularly his skin color. It puts into question whether Charles' skin color or Georgian dialect plays a part in the teacher's response.

Writing Style

The writing style is a strong point in the manuscript. The style and perspective are unique to the story. It skillfully blends in Charles' character and humor to create an authentic feeling to the story. You clearly understand your readers and how to write in the voice of a younger audience that is growing and trying to navigate the world.

Conclusion

This is a wonderfully laid-out manuscript with robust characters, relationships, and scenes. Charles' journey is illustrated by genuine scenes with people and situations that surround him. I appreciated Charles' unfiltered voice through the story as it demonstrated growth towards the end and how he overcame every hardship. Each situation that Charles encounters brings forth a nuance of ideas and growth that is pertinent to his overall character development.

Thank you, again, for sharing *Watch Your Mouth* with me. I thoroughly enjoyed reading about Charles' experience and growth through interactions with his family and his experiences on the road. I appreciated the complexity of the story and how you blend in various themes.

I hope you find my comments helpful in your revision process and I look forward to where you take this book!

Sincerely,

