

# Using Harlequin Critique Service – Is It For You?

By Kellie Finley

*This article first appeared in the August 2004 edition of the Writer's Saddle, newsletter for the Calgary Association of Romance Writers of America (CaRWA).*

Each writer is like a snowflake; different from all others, while sharing some key, defining elements. So, it's not surprising that various writers will use different tools, in different ways, to craft their manuscripts. Before we get into a discussion of whether the Harlequin Critique Service is right for you, we need to ask a few questions and agree on a few points – to define our similarities.

First, why write? I am both optimistic and masochistic in my approach to life. My choices in careers prove it. I am a mother, a consultant, and a romance writer. What other careers offer the daily opportunity to have your heart burst with joy, or break in agony, all based on someone else's actions and opinions? So, I admit it; I am an optimist and a masochist. You are too, or you wouldn't be reading this article. Can we accept that?

Second, do you really want feedback? I've cornered my husband into reading my manuscript over and over again, with each changed word, just to get feedback. I paid complete strangers that I've never met, wouldn't recognize on the street, and won't get a Christmas card from, just to get feedback. Tell the truth, who have you talked into reading your work? Your spouse? Your mom? Your friend (former friend if you do that again)? The list goes on, we both know it, and now you're considering paying a complete stranger to read it. So, yes, you really want the feedback. Agreed?

Third, what are you going to do with the feedback, once you get it? I was afraid to open it. Once I did, I embraced it (it did say some positive things). Then I denied it (it did say I wasn't perfect). Moving on, I finally learned from it (it included great guidance on what to change to be successful). And now, I'm rewriting, rewriting, rewriting. Well, if someone told you what numbers to pick to win the lottery, would you listen or not?

Now, on to specifically using the eHarlequin Learn to Write Critique Service (<http://www.eharlequin.com/cms/learntowrite/ltwSection.jhtml?itcType=critiqued>). If you're not familiar with the service, click on the above listed link, or cut and paste into your internet browser, and click. In a nutshell, you have the opportunity to hire a professional editor to review your work and give you feedback on it. *This is an important point – specific feedback on your specific work, not general how-to's for a mass audience.* The work can be submitted in full or partial form, and depending on where you are from, you can pay for it in Canadian funds or U.S.A. funds. You get a care package back, including an overall evaluation sheet, a critique letter with comments on your work, and a certificate of achievement indicating that you used their service.

So, want to see an excerpt or two of what you get? Come on, you know that's exactly what you were hoping to find in this article, isn't it? (My masochistic tendencies are surfacing again; if you laugh, I'll hear you and you'll be sorry.)

*(Actual quotes from critique letter are in italic.)*

## Writing Style

*...your prologue isn't quite working yet. It is a universally acknowledged truth among writers that the opening of a novel is the most difficult part of the story to write. Readers must have a very strong dramatic hook into the action that grabs them and compels them to keep turning pages. One of the best examples of a great hook is...* The critique goes on to provide an example of an opening line, along with comments on why it's a great hook.

*...Part of the problem is that the prologue is from an observer's (Jack's) point of view which keeps the reader at a distance from the intense emotions of the characters in your story. I recommend revising this in a couple of ways...All of this said, there is the simple question of whether you need a prologue in your story at all...* The critique didn't tell me I had to rewrite my prologue (which I have), but instead gave me several ideas that would improve its emotional pull on the reader. In addition, it challenged

me to really think through whether I even needed to keep the prologue, and if I did, how would I handle the opening of the following two manuscripts (this manuscript is the first in a trilogy).

## **Characterization**

*...you have created characters with passion and courage. However, a little more work needs to be done to build depth and believability for both your heroine and hero...In the next draft, this needs to be ruthlessly cut back, replaced by consistent, specific insight into your heroine's thoughts, feelings, and emotions in every scene, event and interaction...* These comments were triggered from my tendency to emphasize what I see, rather than what my characters feel. Feedback went on to coach me on techniques to help me better balance the two.

## **Plot**

*...your characters seem to be a little more driven by the events in your story than taking action on their own behalf to drive the plot forward themselves... to eliminate the danger of the dreaded 'sagging middle' which is such a common problem with plot structure...* At the time I submitted my partial manuscript for critiquing, I was still struggling with several points in the plot; they just didn't work together. The coaching to shift the focus from the protagonists being impacted by the plot, to having them drive the plot, has smoothed almost all the snags, with a very subtle change and without totally overhauling the story.

All that said, once I absorbed and embraced the feedback from the critique, I needed more – more details, more information, more examples – of how to rewrite certain parts of my manuscript. So, in case you find yourself with a similar need, here are two excellent starting points for more help:

Harlequin Web Site – Learn To Write

<http://www.eharlequin.com/cms/learntowrite/lwToc.jhtml>

Leigh Michaels' Classroom On The Web

<https://home.mchsi.com/~webclass/>

(For those that aren't familiar with who Leigh Michaels is, let me say, she is a very successful romance writer, teaches multiple online writing classes, and has created a marvelous "classroom on the web" with examples, exercises, and worksheets for writers of all skill levels. Visit her web site at <http://www.leighmichaels.com> )

Finally, you ask if I would I do it again – send another submission to the critique service? Now there's that lottery ticket question again – for me, the answer is absolutely! In fact, the next package will be leaving our house around mid-September.

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