



August 2, 2017

Dear Jamie,

I've finished reading *SAY IT NOW*. I can definitely see where the agent's positivity is coming from—this manuscript has a lot going for it. There is nice, thrilling suspense, and you have a great grip on plot. The novel also has a big heart. Of course (since it is my job), I do see areas that can be improved and in this letter, I will offer specific suggestions to enhance the manuscript.

Plot: *SAY IT NOW* has an intricate plot that is full of great surprises and suspense. You plant questions early on, and the reader turns the pages, eager for answers. Sometimes, however, I felt that those answers were given too easily. Often Bradley just flat-out tells Emily what is going on, what has happened, and what will happen. He is like a stand-in for the author. Similarly, after a big build-up of how Emily should tell Ted that she is Lila, he just guesses—the answer is handed to us.

This tendency makes the reader feel as if he or she is not living the story—it seems more like it is being recounted. (Yes, the old “show don't tell adage” comes to mind.) This is definitely akin to what the agent was talking about, actually, with the issues with the voice—it distances the reader. The reader wants to fully experience Emily's discovery of these secrets about her former life or Ted's intuiting Emily is Lila. So we need more scenes, less exposition.

Consider changing these reveals to scenes where Emily would take a more proactive role in making the discoveries (a la the diary-finding scene). Why not have her recognize some eerie similarity between her and Lila or between Carter and Ted? Show her connecting the dots—Bradley shouldn't have to swoop in to explain everything. Could Ted recognize some aspect of Lila in Emily—a specific quality, like her ability to hit a certain note—instead of just saying that he now knows? Along the same lines, I thought there was an opportunity missed for a heightened sense of mystery and intrigue after Emily moves to her new town. Why not have her notice more ways in which the town and people are “off”? But these could just be reflections of the fact that it is her own town, and she's the one who is off.

Also, right now the narrative of Emily focuses very much on her and Ted and how she can help him—her personal growth could be brought to the center more. Perhaps this is Emily's first assignment in a high school, and her instinct is to act like Lila did. While she works on Ted for the assignment, she is cold and standoffish, intimidated by the people. (Just a possibility.)

Two major reveals didn't work for me—Bradley as Emily's father and Sarah as her sister. I wondered if the reveal about Bradley being Emily's father was too much. She is already assimilating a lot of emotions after discovering her own identity and that Lila's mom is her mother and Ted is Carter.

That Bradley was her father didn't seem entirely necessary. However, I do think he could have a backstory that perhaps Emily could relate to, which would make her take him more seriously when he talks about understanding what she's going. And, I did like the element that Bradley was hiding something. If you decided to do away with this reveal, I think you would also have to jettison Bradley dating Lila's mom, which seemed strange in the context anyway—at odds with his identity as a spiritual/supernatural being?

The stakes could be high for Emily where they are now vague or minimal. She comes to town, but seems to immediately fall for Ted and lose sight of the fact that she's actually on assignment. There's no sense that there will be repercussions if she fails the assignment, and I felt if there were that sense, there would be more urgency. I think she needs to be a bit more focused on completing the assignment and more invested in her potential reward. Perhaps instead of making this choice to do the assignments (and to me it was unclear why she had chosen instead of just going to heaven), she *has* to do them to gain entrance to heaven. If she doesn't, she'll face extremely negative fate, a la hell.

Do we need Emily to have already gone back and tried to save Lila? I didn't feel that strongly about it—I'm just wondering if that strand were excised, maybe there'd be more room for deepening of characterization.

World-building: Emily's world is intriguing, but I think the details need to be hammered out more. I had a lot of questions about her powers, including who was giving them to her, and what exactly were the rules. It seemed to me that the rules of this world were too easily broken and that sometimes the powers just popped up when convenient for the narrative. Also I felt like the "time traveler" language implied more of a sci-fiish world, but then we'd talk about angels which seemed more fantasy/paranormal. I think the language and worldview should be more organized and coherent. I was drawn more to the scifi take—the notion of the assignments, the fact that there is nothing particularly ethereal or fantastical about Bradley seemed go more along with that genre. (It seemed a little Philip K. Dick to me.)

I wondered about giving Bradley and Emily too many powers—I was really unclear what they could or couldn't do. Again, I think the story would benefit from there being repercussions if Emily misused her powers or broke the rules. The rules are also extremely unclear—sometimes Bradley seemed to think they were important and sometimes he didn't.

I felt like the notion of God was also danced around too much—and I wasn't sure whom Bradley reported to.

Voice: I think there was some validity to what the agent said about voice (and pointed out a couple of those moments in the text so you could get a feel for it). At times I wondered if it would come more naturally for this book to be written in third person...just a thought. However, I should say that I'm not sure it was a big an issue for me as it was for the agent.

Emily also seemed very adult to me—she seemed so adjusted to living on her own, blithe about schoolwork, un-intimidated by other students. So in some ways her distanced, analytical voice seemed to go hand-in-hand with that quality. Remember she is a kid and all of this should be jarring to some extent, no matter how many assignments she's been on.

Characterization:

Emily: I liked Emily a lot, but sometimes it was hard to really empathize with her depression. I felt the scientific/factual causes behind it were laid out it really well, but I wanted to *feel* it a bit more. The flash of the sports game she wanted to win was really helpful, and I wanted more moments like

that. To really understand and sympathize with her logic for being sad—right now, I feel it's mostly understood as a misperception on her part of her life—but I wanted to empathize more than sympathize.

In addition, I didn't really buy her alcoholism or think it was necessary. I wonder if cutting was enough. To be drinking, we'd have to get involved with where she got this alcohol from, how she concealed it. It just seemed a bit dense.

I wasn't sure she and Ted would have such an adult understanding of the way a relationship was supposed to work.

She talked about introducing Ted to music because she liked it, but I feel as if we don't see her being into music—or into that much of anything except Ted and her past. I think this would give some depth to her character, if we knew what her favorite songs were or her favorite band—saw her react to and appreciate these favorites.

One thing I was curious about was that we start the book with Emily feeling like she wishes she could go back and apologize to her mother, tell her that she shouldn't have killed herself—but I wanted to know more specifically how she had come to these realizations and conclusions. I don't know how much you want to weigh the book down with these heavy issues—but maybe those revelations (about the ways in which she hurt/misread those close to her) could come in the course of the book and be fully realized after Emily learns that she is Lila. I think that's there now, a little, but it could be brought out more—if instead of already being regretful at the start, Emily was more bitter toward her mom and friends. Again, this would let us see her growth and arc. Right now it seems like most of that growth occurred off-stage, through her other assignments.

Ted: Ted is a great love interest. I thought his struggles were really credible. I did feel he was almost too easily attracted to Emily in the beginning. I would have rather seen her have to chip away at his exterior a little. When he just showed up at her house, it seemed too easy. Also, I wouldn't mind his reflecting more on what is so special about Emily—what sets her apart from Lila, and also what makes her different from Sarah. (Again this is where Emily having a music talent could really help deepen her).

Sarah: I felt as if Sarah was too one note—just so positive. She seemed to exist as a foil for Emily. What's in the friendship for her? Can we give her a bit of a dark side or at least a quirky habit? I also think she could easily have been Lila's good friend which would perhaps enrich her relationships with Ted and Emily. And I'm not sure she needed to be Emily's sister. I think if she had been Lila's good friend, we could see her fighting her grief too (which she does a little), maybe even thought she is a good-natured person, she's also trying to conceal her sadness...especially because she lives in the same house as Lila's Mom.

Mom: Mom seemed too sketchy. I wanted to know more of her personal tastes and also details like what she smelled like, looked like, sounded like. Could Emily's depression also be more entwined with her in some way? Like perhaps Emily feels guilty that her Mom is working so hard to support her as a single mother. I just wanted to see some issue between them—that can now be resolved. Also some specifics could go a long way to representing this arc of their relationship—like Mom being frustrated because Lila used to cook breakfast with her when she was little, but then she got depressed and never cooked breakfast with her, too busy sulking, but now Emily joins her.

Bradley: I thought the relationship between Emily and Bradley seemed romantic at first. I never knew what age he was. I loved having the mystery of his origins, but as stated earlier, I thought it was too much to have him be Lila's Dad—unless you want to write a far longer book. I thought the character of Bradley could be more enhanced by giving him more of a creepy/supernatural vibe—

he's her one conduit to the other world, but he seems oddly pedestrian and also like he doesn't have any more insights than she does. He also never puts up any resistance to her plans. I think I would have rather have had him be just as fooled as she was in some ways—instead he just seems to know that everything is part of the “master plan” for Emily to heal.

Pacing: I thought your pacing in this book was excellent. In general, the structure of the book is great—it just flows in a really rapid way. I did think toward the end, however, while I turned the pages because I was curious what would happen, there was a bit of stop-start, stutter feeling. The Ted-Emily relationship especially was beginning to unravel—I couldn't keep track of when he was upset, when she was upset and exactly why, so keep an eye on that.

Setting: Sometimes I felt as if the setting were not fully realized. I wanted to know a little bit more about the town, the other students, adults—just details. I don't think this was a huge deal, but just a few flourishes here and there, to deepen the atmosphere. For instance the description of the beach was lovely, but I had a hard time envisioning how the area looked otherwise. Also the train track placement seemed odd to me—and unnecessary to have a gun *and* the train. I think your command of the psychological/spiritual aspects of this book is solid.

Random notes:

—Watch out for slang—to me it seemed a little dated (“dang”) and regional. This is always a danger with slang, so I would not try to replace it with “hipper” slang but would just delete.

—Past assignments—I felt it would have added a cool element if she could just remember them. I also would look to cleaning up and being consistent with some of the memory stuff. I just lost track of what she remembered and what she didn't and sometimes I felt the wiping out memory was just serving as an excuse to make the plot a little juicier—I think this was because it was inconsistent.

—When it came to Ted's death, I felt really confused about why she had to be so directly involved in it. Is it possible it could just be a disease—or a heart thing? I'm not sure, but my mind was in tangles trying to figure out the rules of time travel when that event happened.

—You can go longer with this, it is a little on the short side now.

Jane, please feel free to let me know if you have any questions—I hope this helps!

All the best,

Maya