**Stone Soup – Prose**

Welcome to Stone Soup – Prose! If you’re looking for constructive feedback on your creative writing in an easygoing, close-knit workshop environment, Stone Soup is for you. We are part of The Writer’s Garret, the oldest nonprofit literary community in Dallas. For more information about The Writer’s Garret, check out [www.writersgarret.org](http://www.writersgarret.org).

**Meetings**: We meet on the first and third Sundays of each month, from 2-4 pm Central time. Occasionally, a meeting is cancelled or rescheduled; if so, notice will be emailed to everyone on the email list for this group. If you’re not on the email list but would like to inquire about a meeting or anything else, please see the contact information at the bottom of this sheet. *Please be on time*, as we will start promptly, and your input is important. You are welcome to attend and participate even if you are not sharing your own work at that time; in fact, we hope that you will do so.

**Scope**: This group is devoted to prose. This includes fiction and creative non-fiction (memoir, creative journalism, etc.). It can also include plays, with the understanding that our experience with playwriting is much more limited. If you write poetry, there are three Stone Soup groups that accept poetry; please refer to The Writer’s Garret website for details. In addition, please note that this group critiques *work in progress*; it is not a place to read work that has been finalized.

**Submissions**:

* Advance submissions: Work to be critiqued must be submitted in advance. There is no minimum or maximum length, but to receive a useful critique, please try to limit your submission to about 3000 words (about 10 pages, double-spaced). If you have a much longer piece, you are encouraged to break it up and submit one section at a time.
* Advance submissions must be emailed to [dianeparker@writersgarret.org](mailto:dianeparker@writersgarret.orgu) a minimum of **8 days in advance**. In other words, for a meeting on Sunday the 9th, the work must be submitted no later than Saturday the 1st. This will allow the moderator to provide the submissions to the group one week in advance, so that everyone has time to read your work carefully.
* Format and copies: Submissions should be double-spaced, with reasonable margins and **page numbers**. Please email your work in DOCX or DOC (preferred) or PDF format. **Please provide the following information at the top of the first page**: your name, what it is (short story, first chapter of novel, etc.). You may also wish to indicate the target audience. If it is part of a larger piece, and is not the beginning, you may wish to include a few sentences at the top about what has come before this section. Feel free to mention any specific feedback you would like from the group.
* Critiques only in person. We will not critique the work of any writer who is not present at that meeting. If you unexpectedly have to miss a meeting, please let the moderator know ASAP. We will gladly hold your piece over to the next meeting.
* Submission queues: We’ve found that four submissions is the most that we can constructively critique during a two-hour meeting. If we have more than four for a particular meeting, I will start a queue for the following meeting. If your piece is bumped to a later meeting, I will let you know in advance.

**Preparation for meeting**: The expectation in this group is that group members will read submissions in advance of the meeting and come prepared to discuss what they liked best about the piece and what their top suggestions are for revision. There is no expectation that written critiques will be provided to authors; however, if you would like to provide written critiques or comments, be assured that the author(s) will be very grateful to receive them. Please email them directly to the author, either before or after the meeting. If you have trouble matching an author with his or her email address, please email the moderator for assistance.

**Critique procedure**: For each submission:

* First, one or two pages of the piece will be read by a group member (not the author). Then the group will discuss the piece as if the author were not there; the author is not allowed to speak at that time. After the critique is done, the author may ask/answer questions and interact with the group.
* Generally speaking, the procedure will be to give each member a chance to state all of their comments before moving on to the next person. This is to ensure that everyone has a chance to provide full input, and that less-assertive voices do not get lost among the more-assertive ones. After everyone has had a chance to speak, there will be some time for a more interactive discussion.
* We will not set strict time limits on the discussion of a piece, but the moderator will keep things moving to ensure that there is a fair amount of time to discuss each piece. Keeping the meeting running on time is not always easy, so please be respectful of the moderator’s efforts to do so.

**When you are the critic**:

* Be kind and respectful, always. Critique the writing, not the writer.
* Bring an open mind. If the work is very different from what you’re used to, give it a chance.
* It is helpful to start with the positive, especially if you also have critiques that may be hard to hear.
* Use words such as “this worked/didn’t work for me” rather than “this is good/bad/right/wrong.” Explain why or why not. Also: “I felt bored” rather than “this was boring.”
* Consider what the writer is trying to accomplish. Did they accomplish it?
* Often, the most helpful feedback for the author is to explain how the piece (or parts of it) affected you, and why. Did you understand it, or were you confused? How did it make you feel? How did you react to the characters? etc.
* Instead of re-writing or “fixing” something, focus on helping the author understand your concern (*e.g.*, you are telling when showing would be more powerful).
* Don’t re-write in your own voice or style. Our goal is to help the writers improve *their* stories, not to rewrite them according to our own preferences.

**When you are the author**:

* Leave your ego and your thin skin at home. The purpose of this group is to provide constructive criticism. It will make you stronger.
* Remember that it’s a draft. You brought it here because you want to improve it.
* Bring an open mind. You can learn from others, even if you ultimately don’t agree with them. Even if you don’t agree with someone’s “fix” for your piece, it can be valuable to understand why something is not working for them.
* At the same time, remember that the criticism that’s hardest to hear might be what you most need to hear.
* At this moment, during the meeting, your goal is just to understand the group’s feedback. Take notes. Ask clarifying questions when it’s your turn to speak. Then turn it over in your head for a few days before deciding what to do.

**Everyone**: What happens in critique group stays in critique group. Respect everyone’s privacy.

**Contact Info**: This group is moderated by Diane Parker, [dianeparker@writersgarret.org](mailto:dianeparker@writersgarret.org). Email Diane if you would like to be added to this group’s email list or if you have any questions.

**Some Things to Consider When Critiquing Prose**

**Overview**: If helpful, you can think of your basic critique as: (1) What you thought the piece was about; (2) what you most liked about it; and (3) your single most important suggestion for rewriting it. Then, consider some of the following (obviously, not every one of these for every piece):

**Intent and Execution:** What do you think the author intended to accomplish? Did they succeed? Why or why not?

If the author is writing in a particular genre, how well did they follow the genre’s expectations?

If they violated those expectations in some way, did that work for you?

**Structure**

Opening: what does it accomplish? Does it make you want to keep reading?

Does the conflict or tension build during the story in a way that works for you?

Was the piece chronological, or not? How did the treatment of time work for you?

Is the pacing good, or did it sag in places? Could the plot development be improved by restructuring?

Are there subplots, and if so, how did they contribute to the story?

Was the point of view the best one for this story? If there were multiple points of view, how did that work?

How did you feel about the ending? Did you feel an emotional payoff? Did it just stop?

Was the ending surprising or predictable?

Was the structure typical for this type of piece, or unusual? How did you feel about that?

How would you describe the voice of the narrator or main character? Was it compelling?

**Setting:** How is the setting conveyed? How does it enhance the story? How important is it to the story?

Was it well communicated, or did you tend to forget where you were?

Were there missed opportunities to include other senses?

**Characters**

Did you come away with a strong sense of who the characters are?

What were the stakes for the main characters? Were they high enough to keep you engaged? Did they escalate?

What was interesting about them? Did the main character(s) change/develop? What obstacles did they face?

Were they complex and surprising?

Do you want to keep reading about these characters?

**Dialogue**

Did the dialogue seem realistic? Could you always tell who was speaking?

How was it used to progress the story? Was it focused, or full of everyday meanderings, “ums” and “uhs,” etc.?

What did you think of the balance of dialogue and narration/exposition?

**Originality:** What felt original in this story? What seemed cliché or overdone?

**Theme**: What was the writer trying to say?

**Writing Quality and Style**

Was it bland and prosaic, lean and sparse, or lyrical and beautifully crafted?

Did the style work for this piece? How did it affect the way you processed the story?

Were there missed opportunities here?

**Literary Devices**

What did you notice by way of symbolism, metaphors, repetition, and other literary devices?

How did they affect the story’s impact on you?

**Grammar, spelling, typos:** Generally, not a good focus for a critique group unless there is an unusual issue, or if you believe that something is getting in the way of the author’s work.

**Return to Intent and Execution:** What did the author intend to accomplish? Did they succeed? Why or why not?