CRITIQUE: *Book Title*

Clearly a well-researched book that gives a strong feel for life in these ancient times. I very much enjoyed the historical aspects of the book, I liked elements of the characterisation and the plot was interesting. You have a good turn of phrase and handle language confidently. The concerns I have centre on the presentation of the plot – the focus on backstory, context and dialogue. But overall, there is much to commend in the book.

Audience/genre

The book fits nicely into the historical fiction genre, though as I explain later in this critique, I feel the 'historical' aspect is overshadowing the 'fiction' aspect in places.

Because the book is currently quite heavy in backstory and context and is complicated in places, I feel this would not appeal to a wide market. I can see ardent historical fiction fans and those with a fascination for Ancient Rome enjoying the book at present. However, were you to develop the fiction side of the book further and pull back on some of the context, the audience for the book may widen considerably.

Title

The title neatly conveys the period in history, so the reader can quickly situate the book in terms of setting and time.

The title also suggests that the empress is the focus of the book, so I expected the book to centre on her. As I mention later, I found myself feeling that, rather, Character X is the protagonist, and the book is more about him than her. For example, at the very end of the book you have the text:

xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Character Z is most interested in Character X's fate, not Character Y's. So I did wonder whether the title needs to allow for Character X as the focus.

Writing style

Fitting of genre

Generally, your language is quite formal, which fits the genre. You need to watch for slipping out of the predominant formal style sometimes. For example, the odd modern-day colloquial expression/phrasing jarred a bit, such as 'caught dead doing' and 'take with a dose of salt' and 'So let me get this right'.

Juxtaposition

You use contrast nicely in places in the book. I particularly liked the juxtaposition of Character A's letter and Character B's letter in Chapter X.

Humour

There are some touches of humour in the book, which I enjoyed. For example:

xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Hooks

I like your occasional use of hooks at the beginning of the book to create suspense, making the reader keen to read on to unravel the mystery; for example:

xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

The more suspense and intrigue you build, the better, so it would be good to see more of this kind of writing later in the book as well.

Tenses

You have a tendency to move between the present and past tense throughout the book. For example:

I <u>told</u> them. They <u>nodded</u>. I <u>think</u> they approved. Then they <u>leave</u> hurriedly.

Told and *nodded* are past tense; *think* and *leave* are present tense.

The whole book needs to be in the past tense. This issue can be resolved with editing.

Accuracy

The book would certainly benefit from a thorough copy-edit. For example:

Current text	Copy-edited text
xxxxxxxxxxxxxxx	xxxxxxxxxxxxx

Dialogue/description

Your dialogue conveys much about the characters and adds interest to the book. I am always a fan of plenty of dialogue in books, because it adds realism and life, and most readers find it more interesting to read than descriptive prose. However, I do have some concerns that the description/dialogue balance in your book is too far into the dialogue camp. You have a tendency to relate backstory and events through a character speaking, which is fine, but it does lead to many lengthy dialogues.

All authors are entitled to poetic licence, and we know that books – especially historical fiction – make use of lengthy monologues in places, but I felt you pushed this a little too far. Characters seemed to launch into long stories and talk and talk without much input from their listener; this is okay in places, but I felt it was overused as a format in your book and therefore felt a bit unrealistic. I'd like to see some of the dialogue broken down so it's more of a conversation and less of a monologue.

Also, you need to watch for the lengthy monologues starting to sound like prose. Again, all authors push this – writing dialogue that reads like prose – and it's accepted by readers to a point. But sometimes I found myself feeling that the dialogue was unrealistic. For example:

> *xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx*

This is being related by a character, and I can't quite imagine someone relating a story in this way in real life.

Historical context

I was most impressed by the level of research you've clearly carried out. As a reader, I found I was comfortable and confident in the setting and time, and this makes the book feel believable.

I think, though, you need to watch sometimes that the book doesn't read like a historical non-fiction book rather than a novel based during a time in history. Sometimes I felt that information presented wasn't essential to the story, and was more an effort to educate the reader about Roman times. I suggest that you pull back on description of the time/context and put more focus on the plot development.

Setting

You vividly portray the historical context, but I did feel in places that the description of settings for scenes was lacking – that you prioritise dialogue and/or description of historical events over helping the reader visualise the sights, smells, sounds etc. of a scene in which action is taking place. This is again about putting more focus on the fiction aspect of the book, and working to help the reader really connect with the characters and action. Here's an example of a setting description I particularly liked; it would be good to see more description along these lines:

> *xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx.*

Also, in places I think you overuse settings. For example, you have two scenes side by side in which Character Y is sitting in her garden, thinking, and you have several scenes set in the

courtyard (though if you bring these scenes together more, as I suggest, this is probably fine). You need to move action to different places where you can, and create vivid pictures of these places in the reader's mind.

Structure

You've clearly thought out the structure carefully, and I think its simplicity in moving forwards in time while moving between characters' points of view works well. There is the sense of the book building towards a climax, which is always important, though I would have liked more drama and tension building to a pinnacle at the end.

I particularly like your framing the book with Character Z reading the story at a later time (I would simply label these two sections the epilogue and prologue to separate them from the main book chapters). It gives the reader a sense of where the story is going and has been.

I also like the use of letters to provide information, the details of setting/time you provide at the start of chapters and your use of descriptive chapter headings.

The following sections outline my thoughts on specifics of the structure.

Chapters

I like that you've broken the book down into plenty of chapters. I did wonder, sometimes, whether chapters could be a little longer. For example, you split the first conversations between Character Y and Character X into several chapters, and in terms of structuring it felt like the pace dropped off because you went from moving the action around in each chapter to sitting still. I'd recommend bringing the conversation into one chapter, or possibly two.

It's important that chapters can stand alone in structural terms – that they have a clear beginning, middle and end. For most of the book I think you achieve this.

For example, here's a good chapter ending:

> *xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx*

It's a clear ending and it signposts to later in the book.

And here's a good chapter opening:

> *xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx*

You plunge the reader straight into the action, immediately hooking their attention (although I did feel this opening also lacked some explanation further on).

Here's a less strong chapter ending:

> *xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx*

It feels like you've inserted the chapter break mid-text; it doesn't feel like the chapter has a clear ending – a sense of finality or a good cliff-hanger.

Length

I think the overall length of the book is fine for the genre. I would be careful not to increase the length further, however.

Opening

I'm afraid your opening didn't grab me. I read the book blind (so didn't read the synopsis first), and it took me a while to realise the book wasn't about Character Z. The first chapter was too long, I felt, and was focused on Character Z's backstory, which didn't entice me to read on in the book. Then the second chapter was again backstory. So I was left feeling a little frustrated that nothing was happening – there was a lack of action, and it's really action that hooks the reader.

Ending

I liked that you came back to Character Z at the end. I'd have liked the penultimate chapter to end with more impact, as it's the end of the main story, and I'd have liked more connection between Character Y and Character X. Also, I think the final Character Z chapter is a little long – the true end of the book needs to be the end of the Character Y/Character X story, and this should be a short epilogue to frame the story.

Finally, it's good to try to make the last sentence of a book a powerful one, and at the moment I feel your last sentence lacks impact.

Point of view (POV)

First/third person
You use the first person narrator for both Character Y and Character X's POV, which leads to the reader getting very lost as to whose POV we're in. For example, Chapter 2 is in Character Y's POV, then Chapter 3 shifts to Character X – but you don't convey this to the reader, and we feel like Character Y has suddenly switched locations/sexes etc.

It's rare to write a book in which two characters are narrated in the first person, because of the confusion it creates. The only way to do it clearly is to write the name of character at the start of each section where you shift. I don't think this would work in your book, though.

My suggestion is that Character X – who is the main character, and who is the writer of the manuscript Character Z is reading so is most likely to be the first person narrator – remains in the first person (I did this, I thought this), but Character Y is narrated in the third person (she did this, she thought this). You then strengthen Character X's voice and avoid the confusion.

It's a big job to revise the book along these lines, but doing so will greatly clarify the writing.

POV shifts
You also need to watch for disorientating POV shifts. For example, in Chapter 1 you move between Character Z's and Character A's POV. Then from Chapter 5 onwards you move back and forth between Character Y and Character X's POV after just short bursts in each POV, and this structuring feels odd against the rest of the book's structuring and is a little disorientating for the reader.

Plot

I enjoyed your plot, and thought it was intelligently written and realistic for the time. However, I think that the story lacks a focus on action – that plot comes second to historical description. It took me some time to get into the book because of the amount of backstory and context described at the start, and really what I wanted was action to grab my attention. For me, the best bits of the book were battle scenes, moments of emotional connection between characters and other action-led sequences, such as the young girl collapsing after being poisoned. I think you could develop more interest/tension/drama in the book. For example, take the following:

> *xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx*

This is a brief, undramatic description of what is a very interesting and tense event. You could develop this to create more of a sense of action and movement in the book.

A technique I often recommend to authors is to imagine your book as a film. Think about how often characters are sitting about talking, and how interesting a viewer would find that after a time.

Confusion
Occasionally, there is some confusion in the plot. For example, in Chapter 15 Character Y visits Character X in his cell, and as she leaves she says, 'You can stay here until dusk and enjoy this place so dear to me.' This seems odd; I assume this has got mixed up with their conversation in the garden?

Another example: Character D says, 'The fact that Character M is ill – possibly also being poisoned, adds to rumours against me.' How does he know poisoning is suspected? Character X confided this to Character Y away from the others.

Characters

Development
I like your characterisation, but I feel you could develop Character X and Character Y further. I found it hard to connect with them, especially at the start. I think more description of reactions

and feelings and more indication of their movement in a scene will greatly improve characterisation; otherwise it tends to be that we're learning about them chiefly through dialogue.

Something I found problematic in the book is that you don't introduce the protagonists' names at the start. We don't learn Character Y's name until page 156, and Character X's name isn't revealed until page 316. It's hard to get to know a character when you don't know who they are.

Generally, though, I like what you've done with these characters. I like that you haven't tried to enforce 21st-century personalities on them, that both can be bloodthirsty and conniving. The names, I think, are excellent.

The chemistry between them could be developed further – although I know you aren't trying to write a romance novel, you could add a little more connection to pique the reader's interest.

A particular strength in your characterisation, for me, is the role of women in the book. Often in historical fiction set in these times (especially that written by male writers) women have minor roles in the story. I think your exploration of the strength of women at this time makes the book compelling.

Protagonist(s)

As I mention in the earlier 'Title' section, I found myself feeling that Character X, not Character Y, is the protagonist of the book. Although you start out balancing their two points of view, by the end of the book the focus seems to be much more on Character X. If you decide that this is indeed the case, it may be worth reviewing the book from that angle and strengthening the story through his eyes.

Realism

Occasionally, I found myself questioning how quickly characters told all about themselves to another character (e.g. Character Y and Character X in the cell/garden), and how realistic this would be. You do make some efforts to explain the openness, but through the book there are several examples of characters very quickly launching into detailed stories of their experiences without much lead in, and this may not be true to life.

I also feel that sometimes you need more description of characters' reaction to dialogue – the dialogue tends to dominate, and we don't know how the listener feels about the words. So, for example, it didn't feel realistic to me that Character Y doesn't react (or we don't know that she does) when Character X tells her that it was he who killed her brother.

Success in publication

I feel that the book requires some development before it could be of interest to a wide audience. The foundations – an interesting story, a fascinating setting and context, compelling characters, intelligent writing style – are there. For me, it's really about working on the fiction side of the book now so that it works as a jolly good read independent of the historical context.

Of course, publishers are notoriously reticent when it comes to taking on new fiction authors, and it's hard to get published in the current economic climate. But with further development and

editing, I see no reason why this book couldn't be a strong proposition and an engaging, interesting read.

BUDGET CRITIQUE: *Book Title*

I like a lot about the central premise of your book: a woman with mental health issues fixating on a figure from the past as a way, in her mind, to move forwards; the incorporation of social networking; the sinister stalking; the merging of chicklit with elements of the thriller genre. There are some nice turns of phrase in the book, and I can see the thought you have put into the structuring.

As I read I found myself struggling to situate this as a book for adults. I think your writing style – phrasing, vocabulary, pacing, structuring – lends itself more to children's/teen writing. That's by no means a criticism; you have a fairly simple style, which is refreshing to read, but it doesn't necessarily match well the genre/themes of the book. I found myself wondering whether the book should be rewritten as a teen novel, though clearly that would be an extensive rewrite. I'm not convinced that you're sitting comfortably at present as a novelist for women; to do so, I think you'd need to work on developing your writing further.

As an adult novel, I would like to see more complexity and depth to the language, plot and structuring. You need to consider what genre this book falls into, what you want the reader to feel – chilled? intrigued? saddened? gripped? amused? etc. The themes are dark, and the book itself would be stronger if it were darker, as it's dealing with a mental breakdown.

There are many ways in which you could bring complexity, intrigue and tension to the plot. For example, the reader can start off hating Character X (so remove the background from her point of view that softens her bullying) and identifying with Character X, then perhaps over the course of the book that reverses – we realise that you've been cagey in your narration of Character X, and actually she's been pretty messed up all along. So her stalking gets dangerous, Character Y gets hurt, and at the end there's some suggestion that she was complicit in Character T's death. It would also be interesting if there was some sexual attraction between Character X and Character Z; perhaps he finds himself torn between the two women? I wonder about the counsellor's role too: I would be tempted to leave her as a very minor character, so the story focuses on Character Y and Character X, and Character Z as the second-level character – so the two women are the centre of the story. Then there needs to be an ending that twists in some way, I think. Just a few ideas for development if you want this to be a dark book for female readers. If it's to be a chicklit book, I don't think the central premise works because it's based on a disturbed mind and not fluffy romance.

I think the structuring needs development. The opening of a book really needs to grab the reader's attention. We need to feel intrigued and compelled to read on. We need to have an emotional reaction. Plunging the reader into a powerful, dramatic scene works well – you could start on a horrific bullying sequence. Every book needs backstory – an explanation of who characters are and how they got to that point in time, but in the first 10,000 words of your book I felt like you were focusing on this too much (telling, not showing) rather than developing the current plot, characters and setting. You move through time and through point of views so much in these first chapters that I was left feeling that there was a lack of depth; that the story was moving too fast and I wasn't connecting to the characters. For example, the death of Character T could be much more poignant, and I really wanted to know the nuts and bolts of the breakdown.

At present, I'm afraid I don't see a publisher taking on this book because the genre and audience are unclear, and the writing style isn't quite tallying with the themes. I think if you were prepared

to work hard on making the book darker, deeper and more complex, then it has potential. You can do this through your own development, or I can advise in a developmental edit.