

American Icon 5

By Stephanie Merchant Johnson

Pikes Peak Writers hosted its fifth annual American Icon, our literary version of American Idol, to a sold-out crowd on August 14. This year's judges were fantasy author Todd Fahnestock, literary agent Rachelle Gardner, and publisher Sue Hamilton. Twenty contestants read their manuscripts for two minutes, then received immediate feedback on what worked and what didn't. Regardless of the genre, those in the audience were able to listen to the writer's work, hear the judges' comments, and apply those suggestions to their own writing.

Here are the contestants, their manuscript titles, and the "good, bad, and the ugly" comments from the judges:

- Robert Spiller, "Tucker Gamble and Fishtown Fires"

Fantastic job of setting opening scene, good sensory use, minimal dialogue allowed for good pacing, tension, and interaction between characters. Suggestion for improvement: start with second sentence for better hook.

- Samuel A. Johnson, "The Evangelist in the Bathtub"

Impressive characterization, strong voice, great use of detail, dry but great sense of humor. Use "side story" later on in book. *Best Overall*.

- Mandy Houk, "The Gathering Summer"

"Lyrical, evocative, emotion-filled, and poetic" writing, great use of contrast. Need less narration, more action and dialogue to discover character sooner.

- Maureen Stephenson, "On My Honor"

Set scene well, good tension, "showed" good clues; however, did not need to repeat certain details. Need more action sooner to draw reader in quicker.

- Brandon Meyers, "The Oasis"

Strong voice, good visuals, good balance between action and dialogue. Recommended choosing the most necessary descriptions and letting the rest go. *Honorable Mention*.

- John Ridge, "Excerpt from the Journal of Vincent Cairnbourne Jr."

Fantastic "spin," wanted to know this kid genius, pulled off the dry humor, great visuals. Improvement: get to the story's plot quicker.

- Amy Koumis, "Spyglass"

Fantastic, authentic dialogue, great sense of humor, terrific log line. POV misleading. *Best Voice*.

- Brandy Vallance, "The Covered Deep"

Piqued interest with "the book," too much detail in places—caused confusion and prevented getting into the story quicker. *Honorable Mention*.

- Bryce Crawford, "Yo No Soy Una Lesbiana"

Fantastic rhythm, humor, good descriptions. Some places too repetitive, suggested getting to relationship between main character and Pat sooner. *Honorable Mention*.

- John Sharpe, "No More Bull"

Got right into story and action, realistic dialogue, described "precise, concrete images," reader simultaneously experienced main character's POV, including confusion with surroundings. Nix one of the swear words.

- Julia Allen, "Red, Bite & Blue"

Terrific job setting scene and mood, great sense of humor. First line cliché-ish, so move

hook up and tone down some of the seriousness.

- James L. Collins, “Jesse’s Journey”

Mesmerizing, lyrical, beautiful, engaging, “classic fairytale.” Make log line about story rather than general theme.

- Mary Koehler, “Texaco Flats”

Tingling, powerful, kind-of-scary voice, good tension and contrast, and fabulous at conveying emotion. Some confusion due to it being Chapter 10. *Best Characterization*.

- Erin Spradlin, “Mazel tov!”

Perfect delivery, awesome hook, amazing humor. Consider her audience, tweak it for a book. *Audience Favorite and Best Essay That Should be Chapter One in Your Book*.

- Anita Miller, “Just Plane Crazy”

Strong tension, immediate suspense. Nix the “journal entry” (delays the action) and restructure the opening.

- Scott Lambert, “Keeper of the Flame”

Great descriptions, poetic style quickly established the story’s mood. Get to characters sooner.

- Robin Widmar, “Knight Owl”

Plunged reader into fantasy world, great interplay and dialogue between characters, great humor and sarcasm. Simplify some parts.

- Kim Henry, “Stillwater Runs Deep”

Right amount of narrative, great descriptions, fun verbiage, great flair for words. Work on log line and include more of character’s dilemma.

- Ron Cree, “Gaap”

Great interplay between characters, great sensory use, wonderful tone, unique setting. Less use of adjective and adverbs, and tighten up the story.

- MB Partlow, “Sweet Teeth”

Great verbs, felt suspense, “stunning time placement.” Get to action sooner and include explanation of why characters cared about gun shots.

Congratulations to all the winners, and be sure to register early for next year’s Icon!

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