EVALIE

Slack Water

NOVEL OR PROSE FICTION · LITERARY FICTION · 2026-10-14

VERDICT Not ready yet *Revise and resubmit* Ready to submit

THE EDITOR'S LETTER

Revise and resubmit: the prose, the opening and the long-range payoffs are already at a professional level, but the book tells the reader what Emmett did long before Hollis learns it, and the middle stalls while she catches up.

Slack Water is a serious, well-made novel. It has a pitch an agent can repeat in one breath: an interpreter suspended for softening a dying man's prognosis comes home to a father who can't speak and keeps making one sign. Under that pitch is a real idea. The professional offence and the childhood habit at the supper table are the same act at two scales, and you never let the parallel become decoration. The prose is plain, exact and controlled across 101,000 words. Emmett is the character who will sell the book. Your planning shows in payoffs that land tens of thousands of words after their setups: the blur where Dale's face should be, the six inches between owing and being owed, the single glove, the hook in the tackle box. The first page holds. The ending earns its weight without going soft.

What holds it back is one structural decision you haven't yet made deliberately. You open the book as a mystery: what is the hand saying, and what happened that night? Then you answer both questions for the reader early. The drawing titled LET HER SWING is on the page in Part 8. Emmett's chapter in Part 12 tells us the sign was held up "so he could not miss it." By Parts 24 and 25 we know he read it and held the barge out of spite. Hollis does not sit down at the kitchen table until Part 36. For something like 30,000 words the reader is ahead of the protagonist, and the scenes in between run on watching her not ask. Each refusal makes sense on its own. Together they read as you holding the door shut. That is where an agent who requested the full manuscript would put it down.

Two consequences follow. First, because the reader already knows the night, you keep retelling it, and each retelling spends charge that the climaxes need. The Saturday noon scene is dramatised in Emmett's chapter, typed on the TTY strip and shown again from Dale's side. The misread OWE sign is explained twice before Dale's chapter. Hollis's seven-paragraph say-back at the table recaps what we have just watched. Second, Hollis's middle is mostly passive. The truth reaches her through messengers (Priya, Cal, Marcus, Idris, Ray), and the cast keeps diagnosing her to her face. By the hearing she has named her own flaw so completely

that she has little left to discover.

The next draft has to choose an engine and build for it. You can protect the reveal: keep Emmett's chapters circling the noon scene and the night without "I read it," let Lorraine's false version ("he couldn't read it") fool the reader alongside her, and let the kitchen table correct them both. Or you can commit to dramatic irony: cut the middle's deductions and repeated deferrals hard, so the reader spends fewer pages ahead of Hollis and each refusal visibly costs her something. Either can work. The current draft does both halfway. Once that is decided, give each piece of April 9 one primary home, compress the long aftermath after the confession and the run of codas after the swing, and you will be well under 100,000 words without touching anything that works.

Before this goes out, two other things. A novel that argues hearing people must not speak for Deaf people will be held to that standard. Commission a paid read from a Deaf, ASL-fluent reader, particularly on Dale's letters and on Chapter 27, which gives us his interior after three hundred pages warning that only the witness can testify. Then reconcile your dates and numbers against a single timeline. The book invites readers to check them, and some don't add up. None of this is a rewrite from scratch. It is a focused revision of a book that is already here.

· · ·

SLACK WATER · HOW IT READS

Concept & hook ..... *Excellent*

An interpreter's merciful lie mirrors her childhood habit at the supper table, a double hook that is distinctive, pitchable and full of book-club argument.

Plot & structure ..... *Fair*

The architecture and payoffs are strong, but the reader holds the central secret about 30,000 words before the protagonist, and the night is retold until it stops landing.

Character ..... *Good*

Emmett, Lorraine and Naomi are complex and alive. Hollis's arc completes in action but sags into passivity in the middle, and Idris is more device than person.

Voice & prose ..... *Excellent*

Plain, concrete and controlled throughout, with a distinct idiom for each point-of-view character. The main habit to address is stating meaning after a scene has shown it.

Dialogue ..... *Good*

Cal, Dale's signed lines and the TTY strip are superb. Long runs of aphasic speech doubled by say-back, and Idris's metaphors, slow the key scenes.

Pacing ..... *Fair*

The first third rises well and the flashback placements are smart, but the middle defers without escalating, and the confession and the climax are each followed by long plateaus.

Setting & world ..... *Excellent*

The cable ferry, the river stages, the county and the Deaf school are specific, consistent and woven into action rather than delivered as exposition.

Market fit ..... *Good*

It delivers book-club literary fiction's payoff with a strong opening, but it is just over the debut length range and needs a Deaf sensitivity read before submission.

HOW TO READ THE RATINGS

Excellent: A real strength. Protect it as you revise. Good: Working, and could be sharper. Fair: Holding the story back. Fix these first. Poor: Needs rebuilding.

Not ready yet: Major work needed before it goes out. Revise and resubmit: Close. Make the fixes, then send it. Ready to submit: Send it out.

WHAT'S WORKING · KEEP THIS

A controlled voice that turns idiom into character

Part 11 · Part 47

"A black shape with nothing in it stood out like a pulled tooth."

The sentences are short and concrete, and feeling comes through objects rather than statements. Each point-of-view character thinks in their own terms: Emmett in tools and the river, Lorraine with a librarian's dryness, Dale in loads and numbers. The pegboard image for anomia is clinically accurate and comes from Emmett's own shop.

Setups that pay off tens of thousands of words later

Part 5 · Part 28 · Part 32 · Part 37

"She could see his hands. She could never afterward see his face."

The blur over Dale's face, the OWE sign, the one glove on the body, the twelve-dollar hook and Emmett's first shout of the book are all planted early and returned to as hinges of the plot. The TTY strip overturns Hollis's founding memory in Dale's own words with no narrator stepping in. Protect every one of these through revision.

Emmett: an opposing force who is never excused and never a monster

Part 24 · Part 25 · Part 37

"Dumb. Is. Bet-ter."

His guilt comes in layers: the nod at the funeral, the half-confession he didn't know was a softening, the noon lie said to cut, and finally the admission that pity was a refuge. The aphasia strips away the little words and leaves his motive nowhere to hide.

An opening that holds an agent

Part 1 · Part 2

“It was not sign language. It was just a man waving no across a river.”

The first page sets up voice, place, a protagonist who reads bodies for a living, and the ferry's rules, all through action. The repeated gesture arrives in Part 2, very early for literary fiction to state its central question.

What to fix, in order

1 Decide when the reader learns what Emmett did

Part 8 · Part 12 · Part 22 · Part 24 · Part 25 · Part 36

“It was not the bottom. There was a floor under that one.”

WHY IT MATTERS

The book answers its own mystery for the reader by Part 12 and settles it by Part 25, eleven parts before Hollis hears it at the table. The kitchen scene lands as confirmation rather than revelation, and the middle runs on deferral. The deduction that Emmett's exact recall proves he read the sign is also weaker than the text treats it, since he had seen the sign twice in daylight. The 1992 tape is the real proof.

WHAT TO TRY

Either protect the reveal (stop Emmett's chapters at the gate, blur the Chapter 4 demonstration, let Lorraine's false version mislead the reader, and save "I read it" and the noon cruelty for the table), or commit to dramatic irony and cut the middle's catch-up deductions and repeated refusals so the reader is ahead of Hollis for far fewer pages. Shift the weight of the argument onto the tape either way.

2 Give each piece of April 9 one primary home

Part 25 · Part 31 · Part 37 · Part 45

“He had pushed the drawing back across the table with one finger.”

WHY IT MATTERS

The noon scene, the OWE sign and the night itself are each told three to five times: in Emmett's chapters, the TTY strip, the hilltop, the table say-back, the commission, Marcus's speech and Dale's chapter. Every retelling is well written. Together they flatten the scenes that most need force.

WHAT TO TRY

Make the TTY strip the first full account of the noon scene. Cut the six-inch explanation from the Chapter 18 doorway. Reduce Hollis's say-back to the lines she has never said aloud. Trim Marcus's speech to the closed-room line, the "I don't" and the raised hands.

3 Make Hollis pursue at least one piece of the truth herself

Part 16 · Part 20 · Part 23 · Part 38

“It was a list of words. He was practicing words.”

WHY IT MATTERS

From the rehab discharge to Harlan Springs she refuses the same knowledge four times, and everything that advances the plot is brought to her by someone else. Meanwhile Dolores, Carol, Marcus, Janine and Idris each diagnose her, and her hearing statement names her flaw so completely that the table has little left to teach her.

WHAT TO TRY

Cut the walk-out on "swing". Give her one act of pursuit before Marcus arrives (asking Cal and being stonewalled, or calling Marcus first). Make the remaining refusals cost her something visible. Roughen the hearing statement so she gets part of it wrong, and let at least two of the confirming voices withhold judgement.

4 Get a Deaf, ASL-fluent reader before querying

Part 28 · Part 46 · Part 47

“It was not hearing English. The grammar bent toward his first language”

WHY IT MATTERS

The book's moral authority rests on how faithfully it renders its Deaf characters. Dale's letters are described as bending toward ASL grammar but read as fluent hearing English. Chapter 27 gives the only Deaf protagonist an omniscient interior that settles the night by authorial fiat, after the novel has argued that no one can.

WHAT TO TRY

Commission a paid sensitivity read covering Dale's written and signed voice, Marcus's, the glossed signs and the CDI and residential-school material. If you keep Chapter 27, cut it to what only Dale can give ("There you are," the missing anger, the apology in "I owe you").

5 Trim to 92,000–95,000 words and fix continuity

Part 38 · Part 39 · Part 40 · Part 49 · Part 50

“She was forty-one. She had nine months of slack water ahead of her”

WHY IT MATTERS

At 101,433 words the book is just over the debut range, and the surplus is easy to find: about eight processing scenes after the confession and five or six codas after the swing. The book also invites readers to check its numbers, and several don't reconcile: the wedding year, the count of bulbs, "all four Kettering ferrymen," Cal's years on the boat, and the TTY timing.

WHAT TO TRY

Fold Cal's admission into a few lines, cut the Idris trailer scene to its silence, and open Chapter 23 at Lorraine's knock. Merge the cable and traveler-block codas and choose one restoration beat. Cut the inventory paragraph so GA follows the barge directly. Build one timeline sheet and reconcile every date and figure against it.

The revision plan

1. Decide whether the middle runs on mystery or on dramatic irony, and restructure Emmett's and Lorraine's chapters and the Part 22 and Part 34 deductions to match.

2. Assign each piece of April 9 a single primary telling and cut or compress the repeats, especially the Chapter 18 doorway, the table say-back and Marcus's ceremony speech.

3. Rework Hollis's middle: cut the weakest refusal, add one act of pursuit, roughen her self-diagnosis at the hearing, and reduce the cast's commentary on her.

4. Compress the post-confession aftermath (Chapters 22–23) and the Part 49–50 codas, bringing the total to about 92,000–95,000 words.

5. Do a continuity pass against a single timeline and fact sheet.

6. Commission a Deaf, ASL-fluent sensitivity read, revise Dale's written voice and Chapter 27 in response, then do a line pass for the over-explanation and recurring tics noted in the craft section.

Overview & synopsis

When a stroke leaves her ferryman father unable to speak, apart from one hand sign he keeps repeating, a sign-language interpreter facing suspension for softening a dying man's prognosis must stop editing her family long enough to hear what really happened the night her Deaf brother drowned.

Slack Water is a quiet, carefully built family novel about a woman whose profession is carrying other people's words, and who learns that she has been shading them all her life. A reader meets a closed ferry, a father who can no longer speak, a gesture nobody will explain, and a brother dead for twenty-four years. The book unfolds through deck work, speech therapy, flashbacks to the supper table and documents from the past (letters, a TTY strip, a videotape) toward a confession and a last crossing before the bridge replaces the boat.

SYNOPSIS

In March 2018, Hollis Kettering, a 41-year-old ASL interpreter in Chicago, comes home to the Landing on the Marrow River. Her father Emmett, the fourth-generation operator of a cable ferry that a new state bridge will replace on November 1, has had a stroke that leaves him aphasic. He

keeps making one gesture: a flat hand rolled over at the wrist. Hollis is secretly on leave. She faces an ethics complaint for signing MAYBE when a doctor told her Deaf client, Walter Brandt, that he was unlikely to live to see his granddaughter graduate.

In April 1994, Hollis's Deaf brother Dale drowned off the ferry on a night when she had given him her lookout watch so she could go out with a boy. The county believes Dale died because he couldn't hear his father's warning. Hollis has blamed herself ever since and became an interpreter because of it. Her mother Lorraine left in 1995. She lives across the river above the old pharmacy, watches the ferry through binoculars, and refuses to ride it.

Through spring and summer Hollis works the deck with the deckhand Cal, falls for the bridge engineer Idris Halabi, and avoids what Emmett, working through his speech therapist's word lists, is trying to tell her. Flashbacks show her softening what her father and brother said to each other at supper from the age of six, until Dale caught her days before his death and told her, "You don't get to edit me." Dale's old roommate Marcus Tolliver identifies Emmett's gesture as LET HER SWING, Dale's sign for a way of shedding drift that Emmett had refused. The county plans a plaque saying Dale "could not hear the river's warning." At her hearing Hollis drops her prepared defence, admits she decided for Walter, and is suspended for twelve months. Cal reveals the pelican hook he bought for Dale's method in 1994 and never fitted. Dale's letters and a TTY transcript from his last afternoon show he took her watch as an apology. A 1992 school videotape shows Emmett reading Dale's deck signs flawlessly at fifty feet.

At the kitchen table, with Lorraine present, Hollis makes Emmett tell it word for word. He read Dale's sign that night and held the barge against a fouled tree out of anger at being shown he was wrong. The bridle parted and swept Dale overboard. Emmett caught his wrist, the glove came off in his hand, and he kept it. He let the town believe Dale couldn't hear, and he told Lorraine only that he couldn't read the sign. Emmett then confesses to the county commission, and the plaque is changed to read: "he gave the warning. His father did not heed it." On the ferry's last day Lorraine rides it. That night Marcus signs from the bow, Emmett says "Let her swing" and trips the hook, and the barge pivots and sheds a log. Hollis forgives her father for what he did to her, but not for Dale. The bridge opens, the barge is towed away, and from the bridge Hollis signs GA: go ahead.

Category and audience. Adult literary fiction with strong book-club potential. It is a contemporary family drama set in 2018, with an extended thread in 1994, in a rural river county that reads as Kentucky. It is told in close third person, mainly through Hollis, with chapters from Lorraine and Emmett and one present-tense chapter inside Dale. The tone is restrained and elegiac, centred on grief, disability, Deaf culture and the ethics of interpretation, with a mystery about one night driving the plot.

Length. At 101,433 words the manuscript sits just above the usual 70,000 to 100,000-word range for a literary debut. This is not disqualifying, but a few thousand words of trimming would put it comfortably inside the range.

Comparable titles. True Biz by Sara Nović: A recent literary novel centred on Deaf characters, ASL,

a residential school for the Deaf and hearing parents who don't sign. It shows the market for this cultural material and the readers who will expect it handled with authority. · Everything I Never Told You by Celeste Ng: A family novel about the death of a child, told across several points of view, in which each member's silences and withheld truths make up the real story. The structure and book-club appeal are close, though Ng's family is not Deaf and her setting is suburban.

Story & structure

The architecture of this book is ambitious and mostly sound. The opening puts a person, a place and a question on the first pages: the closed ferry, the bell, the father who can't speak, and in Part 2 Cal demonstrating a gesture nobody will explain. Three clocks run through the middle and keep it honest: the ferry ends on October 31, the plaque goes to the foundry in late summer, and the Registry hearing falls within 120 days. The major turns arrive in sensible places. Hollis's professional secret is out at about a fifth of the way through (Part 10). Marcus names the sign near the 40% mark (Part 20). The hearing and the TTY strip sit either side of the midpoint (Parts 22–28). The kitchen confession comes at roughly three-quarters (Parts 36–37), the public confession follows, and the swing lands in the last tenth (Part 48). The Walter Brandt subplot is not decoration. It is the same story told in a second key, and it converges with the main plot in action rather than commentary.

The main structural problem is information management. You built the opening as a mystery: what is the hand saying, and what happened that night? Then you hand the reader both answers long before your protagonist gets them. The swing idea, the sign and a drawing titled LET HER SWING are all on the page by Part 8. Emmett's own chapter in Part 12 tells us the sign was made that night 'on a hand held high'. Lorraine deduces in Part 22 that he read it, and Emmett confirms it to himself in Parts 24–25, along with the deliberate 'I don't understand you' at noon. By the time Hollis sits down at the table in Part 36, the reader has held the central fact for something like 30,000 words. The confession therefore confirms rather than reveals. The scenes in between run on watching Hollis not ask, which is a thinner engine than the book needs at that length.

The second structural cost follows from the first. Because the reader already knows the night, each retelling of it spends charge you will want later. The Saturday noon, the misread 'owe' sign, the pike pole and 'It's one truck' are each given in full more than once, and the full account of the night is told to the reader four or five times before Dale's chapter tells it again. The best of these retellings, the TTY strip, the tape and the table, would hit harder if they were not following earlier versions of themselves.

The setups and payoffs are the manuscript's great structural asset, and they show a writer planning across 100,000 words. These include the blur where Dale's face should be, the six inches between 'you owe me' and 'I owe you', the single glove found on the body, the hook in the tackle box, the

stripe on the tower, and GA and SK. Protect all of them. A handful of logic and continuity slips need fixing because the book invites the reader to check its numbers. Two arguments the climax leans on are also softer than the text treats them.

The reader holds the secret long before Hollis does

Part 8 · Part 12 · Part 22 · Part 24 · Part 25 · Part 36

"It was not the bottom. There was a floor under that one."

WHY IT MATTERS

The opening poses two questions: what the hand means and what happened that night. The book answers both for the reader early. The flashback in Part 7 shows Dale's flat hand pivoting, and Part 8 shows the drawing titled LET HER SWING, so the sign is decoded twelve parts before Marcus names it. Emmett's Part 12 gives us the sign held up 'so he could not miss it', 'It's one truck' and the wrist. Lorraine's deduction in Part 22 and Emmett's 'false floor' in Part 24 settle that he read it, and Part 25 dramatises the noon cruelty in full. From then on, the long middle (Hollis walking out on 'swing', hiding the plaque folder, deferring the tape for more than a week) reads as the author holding a door shut, not as suspense. The kitchen scene still works because of what is new in it: the anger motive, the wrist and glove, and the swept lookout. But it lands as confirmation, not revelation.

WHAT TO TRY

Decide which engine you want and build for it. One option is to protect the reveal. Blur the Chapter 4 demonstration so the sign isn't modelled for the reader. Stop Emmett's Chapters 7 and 14 at the gate, letting him circle the noon scene without 'I READ IT'. Give Lorraine her false clue ('he couldn't read it') in Part 9, so the reader is fooled alongside her and 'I. Read. It.' corrects both of them. The other option is to commit to dramatic irony. Then cut the middle's deductions and repeated deferrals hard, so the reader spends fewer pages ahead of Hollis and every refusal costs her something visible.

The night is retold until it stops landing

Part 25 · Part 28 · Part 31 · Part 37 · Part 42 · Part 45

"He had pushed the drawing back across the table with one finger."

WHY IT MATTERS

The Saturday noon scene is fully dramatised in Emmett's chapter (Part 25), told again on the TTY strip ('PUSHED IT BACK WITH ONE FINGER'), and shown a third time from Dale's side (Part 46). The misread 'owe' sign is explained in Part 28, re-dramatised with the same 'six inches' explanation in Part 31, and shown again in Part 46. The whole night is assembled in Emmett's chapters, rendered from the hilltop in Part 32, confessed at the table, recapped in full by Hollis in Part 37, reported to Marcus, confessed to the commission, summarised in Marcus's ceremony speech, and finally lived through by Dale. Each telling is well written. Together they lower the

charge of the scenes that most need it.

WHAT TO TRY

Assign each piece of the night one primary home. Let the TTY strip be the first full account of the noon scene, with Emmett only circling it beforehand. In Part 31, keep the doorway for what is new (his face, the half-raised hands, her not turning) and cut the re-explanation. Cut Hollis's say-back in Part 37 to the lines she has never said aloud. Reduce Marcus's speech to the closed-room line, the 'I don't' and the raised hands. If you keep Dale's chapter, and there is a case for it, strip it to what only Dale can give.

Setups planted tens of thousands of words ahead

Part 5 · Part 28 · Part 32 · Part 37 · Part 24 · Part 41

"She could see his hands. She could never afterward see his face."

This is offered in Part 5 as a quirk of memory and pays off in Part 28 as the key to the whole misreading: she wasn't looking at his face because she didn't want to know what was on it. The TTY strip ('I WAS HARD ON HER WED I OWE HER') overturns the founding memory in Dale's own words, in a period-accurate format, with no narrator stepping in. Other payoffs work the same way. 'He had one glove on' (Part 32) returns as the glove in the handkerchief drawer (Part 37). The 'twelve dollars' remark in Part 7 becomes the hook in Cal's coat pocket on the night of the accident (Part 24), which is then fitted at dawn (Part 41). Emmett never shouted in 1994, and his first shout of the book is 'Here', up the hill to his daughter. These are the bones of the book. Protect every one through revision.

The Brandt subplot mirrors the main plot and converges with it

Part 10 · Part 23 · Part 39 · Part 42 · Part 44

"Make it anyway."

Walter Brandt's case arrives just after Chapter 4 has shown the childhood version of the same act, so the reader draws the line before Hollis does. The subplot then earns its place by escalating independently. Carol's testimony costs the MAYBE in concrete terms (a man dying with notes nobody could read), and her letter about the suit reframes the error: the right to choose hope belongs to the person told. The two plots meet in action when Hollis refuses Wade's 'kindness' at the commission and names Walter in public. When Emmett hands her the binoculars to read the stripe in Part 44, the book resolves its own moral question. Deciding was never the sin. Deciding for someone else was.

The climax restages the night with every role reassigned

Part 47 · Part 48 · Part 49

"It came out whole. Three words, in order, with nothing missing, in the voice she had

known all her life.”

The swing puts Hollis at the upstream rail on her watch, a Deaf man at the bow by his own choice (Marcus is asked with PLEASE and visibly decides), and Emmett with one finger on the hook. The aphasia arc, the word list and the drilled 'swing' all pay off in a single spoken phrase. The scene then refuses easy vindication: Emmett admits he hoped it wouldn't work ('So it. Would-n't. Have. Mat-tered.'). That is the right late turn. It keeps the climax morally specific rather than redemptive, and it echoes Cal's 'if it worked, I'd of had to know that.'

Two arguments the climax leans on are softer than the text treats them

Part 22 · Part 34 · Part 37

“If a man cannot read a sign, he cannot remember it.”

WHY IT MATTERS

Lorraine, and later Hollis, argue that Emmett's exact recall of the sign proves he read it that night. But the book has already shown him the sign twice in daylight, a month before and at noon, and in Part 12 he made it himself 'to show he'd got it.' Remembering the shape proves he learned it, not that he read it in the dark. The 1992 tape is the real proof: on deck, at fifty feet, he never missed. Separately, the counterfactual in Part 37 ('I'd. Not. Heard. You. Ei-ther.'), which says the lookout would have changed nothing and would probably have been swept off too, absolves Hollis completely and conveniently, from the one witness with every motive to believe it.

WHAT TO TRY

Move the weight of the deduction onto the tape and either drop or qualify the memory argument. Leave a seam of doubt in the counterfactual. Hollis could notice how neatly it suits them both, or the text could let it stand as Emmett's belief rather than fact.

Events arrive on cue

Part 11 · Part 24 · Part 39 · Part 40

“He was early for the first run by an hour.”

WHY IT MATTERS

The world keeps arranging itself around Hollis's inner beats. News of Walter's death comes in the same call as the adjudication notice. The plaque appears in the week the word list reaches 'swing'. The hearing, the first summer rise, the log on the bridle and the hook from the tackle box all fall on one day ('at six, though not a drop had fallen at the Landing, the Marrow began to rise'). Carol's letter arrives on the day of Hollis's worst reckoning, and Idris turns up at dawn exactly when Emmett can't fit the shackle alone. Each is defensible on its own. Together they show the author's hand.

WHAT TO TRY

Spread the hearing day and the flood by a few days. Give Idris a line of motive for being at the west

landing early, and note that the book places his trailer on the east bank. Move Carol's letter off the day of the confession.

Continuity: the book invites date-checking, so fix the slips

Part 7 · Part 20 · Part 31 · Part 46 · Part 45 · Part 50

“two people who had been married twenty-three years”

WHY IT MATTERS

There are several small inconsistencies in a novel that rests on exact numbers. The wedding date is given as 1971 in Part 7 but implied as 1970 by the 1975 'fifth anniversary' in Part 20. The TTY timing conflicts: in Part 31 he goes up to the machine 'a minute later', but in Part 46 'Half an hour ago his sister came down these stairs'. Wade honours 'all four Kettering ferrymen' at a ceremony that renames Dale 'Ferryman', though the 1992 tape makes Dale the fifth. The bulbs were 'in every room' in Part 2 but number four in Parts 20 and 50. Marcus asked for the tape back 'for the last day', and Hollis still has it on November 5. Cal's tenure varies between about thirty-five and 'thirty-four years'. In Part 14, Hollis says she hasn't spent an anniversary at home 'since the first one', but she lived there until autumn 1996.

WHAT TO TRY

Build a simple timeline sheet (births, wedding, 1994 timings, the 2018 calendar) and reconcile everything against it in one pass.

Character

This is a book about people, and the people mostly hold. Emmett is the strongest character on the page: a man of forty signs and few words whose stroke takes the rest, and whose interior voice (the pegboard, the trotline, the false floor under his 1995 confession) is distinct from everyone else's. He is the opposing force and he is not a villain. The thing Hollis is up against is his choice on the river, compounded by twenty-four years of letting the town's kinder sentence stand. Underneath that is her own need to keep the guilt that has organised her life. You name that second force precisely on the unfinished bridge, and it is the best character insight in the book.

Hollis is well conceived. Her want (to be useful without being looked at, and to keep her account of the night sealed) and her need (to stop standing in the middle and receive what is said to her whole) are the same professional reflex seen from two sides. The Walter Brandt subplot makes that reflex a mirror of the childhood one rather than a coincidence. Her arc completes in action: the hit-the-table rule, her stopped hands at the kitchen table, refusing Wade at the commission, carrying Marcus's "I don't" to her own father in Marcus's register. Those scenes need protecting.

The weakness is her agency through the middle. From roughly Part 13 to Part 29 she mostly

refuses, and the story reaches her through other people. Priya tells her what the hand is, Cal rebukes her, Marcus names the sign, Lorraine sends Idris to ask, Idris recaps everyone else, and Ray testifies. Because Emmett's chapters have already put the reader ahead of her, each refusal reads as waiting rather than resistance. At the same time the cast keeps explaining her to herself (Dolores, Carol, Marcus, Janine, Idris). The supporting characters become commentators on the heroine, and her own self-diagnosis arrives finished at the midpoint hearing, which leaves her little to discover later.

On point of view: this is Hollis's story, and the Lorraine and Emmett chapters earn their place because each holds a version of the night that Hollis needs. The one choice to reconsider as character rather than plot is Chapter 27, which goes inside Dale. It is beautifully done, but it hands the reader a dead Deaf man's thoughts directly, in a novel that has argued that no one but the witness can say what happened on the deck.

Emmett: a fully realised opposing force

Part 24 · Part 25 · Part 37

"Dumb. Is. Bet-ter."

Emmett's guilt is layered rather than simply revealed. First there is the nod at First Christian. Then the half-confession to Lorraine, which he did not know was a softening until he heard himself make it. Then the noon lie, said "to cut". Then the admission that pity was a refuge ("Than. Mean."). He is never excused, and the book never makes him a monster. "He had not wanted to be looked at" names his flaw in six words, and every later choice he makes is measured against it. This is the character who will sell the book to an editor.

Hollis's agency sags in the middle

Part 13 · Part 16 · Part 17 · Part 20 · Part 22 · Part 30

"It was a list of words. He was practicing words."

WHY IT MATTERS

Between the rehab discharge and Harlan Springs, Hollis declines to know the same thing at least four times: she denies the sign to Priya, walks out on "swing", hides the plaque folder, and offers the lemonade. Almost every advance comes from someone else pushing. Each refusal is psychologically sound on its own terms, but they do not escalate, and the reader already holds most of the answer from Emmett's chapters. So a protagonist who is a professional reader of hands starts to look held shut by the author rather than by herself.

WHAT TO TRY

Give her one act of pursuit before Marcus arrives. She could ask Cal directly and be stonewalled, or call Marcus first. Cut the weakest refusal (the walk-out on "swing" in Part 16 repeats Part 4), and make each remaining refusal cost her something visible: a relationship, a lie she has to tell aloud, a moment Emmett sees her flee. Let at least one piece of the truth reach her because she went after it,

not because a messenger arrived.

The fixed end explains her, and her arc lands in action

Part 27 · Part 36 · Part 42 · Part 45

> *"It's terrible. But it's a place to stand. It's the fixed end."*

This line retroactively earns months of avoidance. She is not squeamish. Her guilt is her identity, and the truth would take it away. From there the change shows in what she does, not in what she says about herself: she stops signing at "Mad" and makes herself pick it up again, she refuses to "explain" her father to Wade in public, and she voices Marcus's "I don't" to Emmett without shading it while Janine's pencil stays still. The bounded forgiveness on the stern in Part 49 is the honest end point for her.

Her self-knowledge arrives too early, and the cast keeps narrating it

Part 11 · Part 23 · Part 26 · Part 38 · Part 44

> *"I think I was standing in the middle, every time, deciding it was safe to let things through."*

WHY IT MATTERS

By the midpoint hearing Hollis states her flaw completely and correctly, and by Part 26 she adds "I just can't seem to stop." Around her, Dolores, Carol, Marcus, Janine and Idris each diagnose or confirm her. Marcus calls her table rendering "the cleanest thing I've seen a hearing person sign in ten years" right after the reader has watched it. When everyone understands the heroine, the heroine has nothing left to learn except how to act, and the secondary characters flatten into chorus.

WHAT TO TRY

Roughen the hearing statement so she gets part of it wrong. She could still frame it as love for Walter, not as her own need to stand in the middle, and leave the childhood connection half-made, for the kitchen table to finish. Then let at least two of the confirming voices withhold judgement. Marcus refusing to grade her, or Janine logging the hour without comment, would trust the reader.

Lorraine, and Naomi Stiller, refuse to be simple

Part 9 · Part 22 · Part 40 · Part 42

> *"I liked it. He was mine."*

Lorraine's principled refusal ("I did the hard part") is also self-serving, and the novel finally makes her say so. She learned Dale's language and let a six-year-old carry it, partly because it kept her son hers. Drawing the curtain in Part 22 shows her capacity for denial before she admits it. Naomi Stiller does the same work in public: "Well, I blame him" stops the commission scene from

becoming a vindication, and her own authorship of the false wording widens the harm beyond the family. These two keep the book from becoming a single-villain story.

Idris is more instrument than person

Part 6 · Part 16 · Part 27 · Part 44

“Everyone on that river is telling you the same thing, and has been for months.”

WHY IT MATTERS

He enters asking questions the reader needs answered, serves as Lorraine's messenger, recaps the plot back to Hollis, and supplies the structural metaphors. He is decent and well-voiced, and his best moment is the one where he is told "Don't give me a bearing" and simply makes coffee. But until West Virginia he wants nothing that could cost him, so the romance has one person in it.

WHAT TO TRY

Give him a private stake early and keep it live. The ring-finger band, the separation he regrets with Samira, the change order Emmett cost him, and the job he does not want could all serve. Let him be wrong about something that matters to her, not only about pier three, and let the load-test metaphor be one he gets wrong or she refuses, rather than another accurate reading of her.

Chapter 27 speaks for Dale after the book warns against it

Part 20 · Part 46 · Part 47

“You've got a story, same as the town does.”

WHY IT MATTERS

Marcus's line, and Hollis's later "We've got a story again", establish that only the witness can testify to the deck. Chapter 27 then grants us Dale's interior directly, in present tense, settling the night by authorial fiat. It is very well written, and Dale's vocabulary of load and feeling through the feet matches the boy in the letters. But in a novel about hearing people deciding what a Deaf person meant, some readers, and some Deaf readers in particular, will notice the novel doing exactly that to its one Deaf protagonist.

WHAT TO TRY

If you keep it, and there is a case for it, cut it back to what only Dale can give: "There you are", the absence of anger, his gladness that Hollis is out, and the apology in "I owe you". Drop what the table scene and Chapter 18 already established. Consider framing it so the reader feels the shift as deliberate. Separately, have a Deaf sensitivity reader look at Dale's written voice, especially the letters the narrator says bend toward his first language, which on the page read as fluent hearing English.

Loose threads in Hollis's own life

Part 14 · Part 27 · Part 38

“Once, the first year of her marriage, in a hotel in Door County”

WHY IT MATTERS

Hollis is 41 and her defining habit is editing what others are allowed to hear. A failed marriage is the obvious place that habit would have shown, yet Daniel gets three glancing mentions. Dolores, the colleague who first names the habit ("you came to us already knowing how"), vanishes after the hearing and never learns what happened, while Marcus gets the word-for-word call.

WHAT TO TRY

Either give Daniel one specific memory in which Hollis sees herself softening something for him, or cut him to a single line. Bring Dolores back for one exchange after the kitchen table. She is the person with the standing to receive the truth that her diagnosis prompted.

Voice, prose & dialogue

Your prose is the strongest thing in the manuscript. It is plain, concrete and controlled. Sentences are short, averaging about 9.6 words. Adverbs are rare, at about 3.5 -ly words per 1,000. Feeling comes through objects rather than statements: the pill organizer with Saturday still full, the dead bulb by the telephone, the pencils sharpened with a knife. The voice holds across 101,000 words. Each point-of-view character gets an idiom of their own rather than just a new name. Emmett thinks in tools, farms and the river. Lorraine thinks with a librarian's dry precision. Dale, in Chapter 27, thinks in loads and numbers. Hollis's interior runs through an interpreter's habits of reading other people, which fits a book about what gets carried across.

Point of view and tense are well disciplined. I found no unintended head-hopping. Each chapter stays inside one consciousness, and when the book shifts (to Lorraine, to Emmett, to Dale's present tense) it does so at a chapter break and on purpose. The few slips are small. In Emmett's chapter, "the girl" means Priya for one line after meaning Hollis throughout. The early chapters also lean on coy phrasing about the night of the accident, which I cover below.

The main problem at this level is over-explanation. The book keeps telling the reader what its scenes mean. The narration does it, Idris's engineering metaphors do it, and a run of supporting characters who diagnose Hollis to her face do it. Each instance is often a good sentence. Together they make the book feel less sure of its reader than its best scenes earn. Next come a handful of recurring tics: Emmett's laugh tag, the year-counting, the "It was not X. It was Y." turn. They are effective at first and dulled by repetition.

This is a first draft, so treat the habits below as patterns to address in revision, not lines to fix now.

Much of what they touch may move or be cut when you restructure.

A disciplined voice that turns idiom into character

Part 11 · Part 8 · Part 47

> *"A black shape with nothing in it stood out like a pulled tooth."*

Emmett's pegboard image for anomia comes from his own shop, is clinically accurate (the word's outline is there, the word is not), and carries through the whole chapter. That is the voice at its best: the comparison belongs to the character. Lorraine's chapters do the same in a different key ("Nobody had ever been unkind enough to ask what else a woman might look at through a pair of binoculars"), and so does Dale's interior in Chapter 27 ("It is the number he was afraid of. He has checked it. It is still the number."). Because the voices are distinct, the point-of-view shifts read as earned rather than convenient. Protect this in revision.

The book states its theme after the scene has shown it

Part 3 · Part 23 · Part 38 · Part 39

> *"Everybody in this, the living and the dead, had been told the truth at some point and had gone ahead anyway."*

WHY IT MATTERS

Carol's letter and Walter's suit have just made this connection plain, and then the narration spells it out. The habit runs through the book. "It had been the best thing about her: that she could become nearly nothing, and that it was useful" (Part 3) comes after the corridor paragraph has already shown it. Dolores, Carol, Marcus, Janine, Idris and Cal each give Hollis a clear verbal account of her flaw or her growth ("I think I was standing in the middle, every time"; "that was the cleanest thing I've seen a hearing person sign in ten years"). Each time the reader is handed a conclusion they had already reached, and your strongest scenes lose some of their charge.

WHAT TO TRY

In revision, mark every sentence that names what a scene means, in narration or in dialogue, and cut at least half. Where a supporting character diagnoses Hollis, see whether the scene still works without the diagnosis. Let at least one of those voices withhold judgement entirely. The image or the act should carry the meaning, as it does in "She had stopped signing."

Dialogue that carries information in its own idiom

Part 2 · Part 18 · Part 28 · Part 36

> *"Says cussing's kept in a different drawer."*

Cal's line delivers real neurology (automatic speech) in his own words and anticipates the pegboard image. Dialect, rural grammar and signed speech are handled with confidence and never condescension. Dale's signed lines are sharp and fully in character ("You don't get to edit me";

"Then interpret my face"). The TTY strip reproduces the period conventions (GA, SK, run-on capitals) exactly and delivers the book's biggest revelation in Dale's own words with no narrator stepping in. Tags are minimal and almost always "said" or an action, which suits the restrained voice. Emmett's aphasic speech does real dramatic work: with the small words gone, his motive has nowhere to hide ("Not. Scared. Not. Dumb. Mad. At him. For. Right.").

Long runs of aphasic speech, doubled by Hollis's say-back

Part 36 · Part 37 · Part 42 · Part 49

“Mad. At him. Proud.”

WHY IT MATTERS

The syllable-by-syllable rendering is right for the key lines. Across the table confession, the commission meeting and the stern scene it runs for pages, and Hollis repeats almost every line back in full. That is the point of the protocol, but the reader takes in the same content twice, at a slow reading pace, at the book's climaxes. The fluency also rises when the plot needs it: after chapters building fear of the jam, Emmett never seizes during the confession.

WHAT TO TRY

Keep Emmett verbatim at the lines that matter and summarise the connective passages in narration. Where Hollis's restatement adds nothing new, give only one of the two versions. One real seize-up during the confession, waited out under Hollis's own rules, would make his fluency elsewhere feel earned.

Idris speaks mainly in structural metaphor

Part 16 · Part 26 · Part 27 · Part 44

“You've described a member that's pinned at both ends.”

WHY IT MATTERS

Hang versus lean, the expansion joint, fixed and free bearings, the pinned member, "takes a set": almost every serious exchange with Idris turns into a lesson in engineering applied to Hollis. The book knows it ("Don't give me a bearing" in Part 39 is one of its best moments), yet the load test in Part 44 repeats the move with "It takes a set. It stays bent." Each metaphor states the theme outright, and together they make him the book's explainer rather than a man with his own voice.

WHAT TO TRY

Keep one structural image as his signature, the joint in Part 27 is the strongest, and let the others become plain speech or simply what he sees on the bridge. The load test can stand as an image (the gauge reading zero, Hollis watching) without his gloss.

Recurring tics that lose force through repetition

Part 3 · Part 12 · Part 14 · Part 32

“a single pushed breath through the nose”

WHY IT MATTERS

Emmett's laugh is tagged this way, in close variants, dozens of times across all three points of view. Year-counting ("twenty-four years", "twenty-three years", "thirty-four years") has become a refrain several times per scene by the middle ("It had been in him for twenty-four years, in the dark, folded up small"). The "It was not X. It was Y." turn opens the book superbly ("It was not sign language. It was just a man waving no across a river.") but becomes a reflex by the night of the accident ("It was not thunder."). The full description of the hand-sign (edge-on, rolled at the wrist, palm up) closes scene after scene in Parts 12 to 15. Repetition dulls the motifs you most want to land.

WHAT TO TRY

In a later pass, search for each of these and keep perhaps one in four, saving the full form for moments that change something. Vary or drop Emmett's laugh tag. Keep the year-count only where the number itself matters.

Coy withholding in close third person

Part 2 · Part 5 · Part 9

“It was the job she had been supposed to be doing on a particular night.”

WHY IT MATTERS

In Hollis's own head the night of the accident would have a name. Phrases like "a night in April of 1994", "whatever there was to be seen" and "a particular night" read as you holding back information rather than as her avoiding it, especially since Dwight Purcell's scene reveals the watch a page later. Lorraine's chapter does the same with evasive pronouns ("He was trying to say it", "the other thing") about a version she plainly knows. Readers feel the author's hand on the scale, and the later reveals land softer.

WHAT TO TRY

Let Hollis think "the night Dale drowned" outright. The mystery is what happened, not that something did. In Lorraine's chapters, either give her the version she holds or show her actively refusing to look at it, so that the gap is hers rather than yours.

Dale's written voice doesn't match the narration's claim

Part 28

“It was not hearing English. The grammar bent toward his first language”

WHY IT MATTERS

The letter excerpts that follow read as fluent, idiomatic hearing English, so the claim isn't borne out

on the page. The TTY strip is more convincing. The gap matters because the book's moral authority rests on rendering Deaf characters faithfully, and readers from the Deaf community will notice.

WHAT TO TRY

Either let the letters show some of the bend the narrator describes, or drop the assertion. Before submission, a Deaf sensitivity reader across Dale's written and signed voice, and Marcus's, would be worth the investment.

Perception filtering and stacked past perfect

Part 14 · Part 25 · Part 26

> *"She saw him measure it. She saw what it cost him to come out where he did."*

WHY IT MATTERS

Perception and thought verbs run at about 14.6 per 1,000 words. For an interpreter who reads faces for a living, filtering through "she saw" is often thematically right, but in pairs and chains it puts a pane of glass between the reader and the event. The long flashbacks in Emmett's chapters run almost entirely in past perfect ("He had stood up when Emmett came in. He had been waiting."), which keeps the Saturday-noon scene at arm's length when it should play live.

WHAT TO TRY

Later, cut the filter wherever the action can stand alone ("He measured it"). In extended flashbacks, use one or two "had"s to enter, then slip into simple past, and return to past perfect only on the way out.

Pacing & chapter notes

The book's tension rises well in its first third. The opening establishes the ferry, the closed river and the turning hand within two pages. The "Dale" jam at the end of Chapter 2 (Part 4), the supper scenes of Chapter 4, the four-second lag in Chapter 6, and the Priya photo session that ends Chapter 7 on "I" each lift the line higher than the last. The flashback chapters (4, 10, 18, 27) are placed as escalations rather than rests, and that is the best pacing decision in the manuscript. Chapter 10's supper (Parts 17–18), Marcus on the porch (Parts 19–20), the hearing and the log (Parts 22–24), the night of 1994 (Part 32), the tape (Part 33), the table confession (Parts 36–37), the commission (Parts 41–42) and the swing (Part 48) are the peaks, and they are well spaced.

The sags fall in predictable places. They come either straight after a peak or wherever the reader already holds what a scene is working toward. Three kinds recur. The first is exposition or summary arriving directly after a high point: the bridle mechanics after "Dale", the low-water opening after the TTY strip, and the Chapter 25 montage after the commission. The second is a deferral beat repeated without escalation: the second approach to Dale's door, the walk-out on

"swing", and the week-long delay before the tape. The third is the same night retold yet again: the say-back at the table, Lorraine's reasoning in the car, Marcus's speech, and parts of Dale's chapter. Whether the reader should be ahead of Hollis at all is a Story question. The pacing cost is that each retelling now arrives at a moment when momentum matters.

The book rushes once, in Part 23, where the hearing, the first summer flood, the log on the bridle, the pelican hook and Cal's "ask him" all fall on one afternoon. Otherwise its tempo errs toward slow. Fifty parts across 101,433 words average about 2,000 words a part, and twenty-nine chapters average roughly 3,500 words. The chapters are fairly even, and none is badly over-long. The length problem is cumulative: about eight processing scenes between the confession and the hook (Chapters 22–23), and five or six codas after the swing (Chapter 29). Compressing those two stretches is the most efficient way to bring the book comfortably under 100,000 words without touching anything that works.

Chapter endings are a real strength, and they are mostly short and physical: the shortened bridle at the end of Chapter 10, the bell at Deal's, "He almost has it." Too many, though, close on the same image of the hand rising and turning, which by Part Two has stopped working as a button. Chapter openings are good when they are dated or set in another point of view, and slower when they begin with weather and season (Chapters 9 and 17).

The ending runs in five or six codas

Part 49 · Part 50

“She was forty-one. She had nine months of slack water ahead of her”

WHY IT MATTERS

After the swing and the stern scene, the book closes with the first bridge crossing, the cable coming down, the traveler block, the rewired lights, the Registry reflection, the barge passing under the bridge, and an inventory paragraph that sums up what the scenes have just shown. Each is well made. Together they read as a series of endings, and attention drifts in Part 50 before the GA image pulls it back.

WHAT TO TRY

Merge the cable and traveler-block beats into a paragraph. Choose either the bridge crossing or the rewired lights as the restoration note and cut or shrink the other. Cut the inventory paragraph so the GA image follows the barge directly. This is also where several thousand words can come off.

The post-confession aftermath does the same work several times

Part 38 · Part 39 · Part 40

WHY IT MATTERS

Between the table scene and Emmett going down for the hook come three silent days, Cal's admission, the Marcus call, Idris in the trailer, Carol's letter, the cemetery, the porch, Emmett's reflection on the porch, and Lorraine's Sunday visit. Several of these scenes tell Hollis, in different

voices, not to take on a new debt or give her father a clean ending. Cal's admission largely restates Part 24. Emmett's reflection re-explains the porch exchange just dramatised. The book's highest point is followed by its longest plateau.

WHAT TO TRY

Keep the Marcus call, Carol's letter, the cemetery and porch, and Lorraine's Sunday visit, which are the scenes that move something. Fold Cal's admission into a few lines elsewhere. Cut the Idris trailer scene to its silence. Open Emmett's Chapter 23 at Lorraine's knock rather than with his retrospective.

Retellings of the same night slow the peaks

Part 31 · Part 35 · Part 37 · Part 45

“On Wednesday, April sixth, Dale told you he was leaving.”

WHY IT MATTERS

Hollis's full say-back at the table is seven paragraphs of events the reader has just watched happen. Lorraine's drive round by Pell's Mill walks through "if he had read it" a third time. The doorway in Chapter 18 re-explains the six-inch OWE sign already explained in Part 28. Marcus's ceremony speech recounts the night again. Each retelling arrives at a moment where the scene should be accelerating. (The underlying decision about when the reader learns the secret belongs to Story. The note here is about where the repetition sits.)

WHAT TO TRY

In the say-back, summarise in narration and quote only the lines Hollis has never said aloud. Cut Lorraine's car reasoning to a few sentences and let the arrival at the house carry the chapter. Drop the explanatory sentences in the Chapter 18 doorway and let it play. Compress Marcus's account of the night to a line, and keep the closed-room line, the "I don't" and the raised hands.

Deferral beats in the middle repeat instead of escalating

Part 6 · Part 16 · Part 30

“It was a list of words. He was practicing words.”

WHY IT MATTERS

Hollis turns Dale's doorknob and lets go (a second approach after Part 2). She walks out of the kitchen when "swing" comes up, which replays the Part 4 walk-out and comes just before the stronger lemonade refusal in Part 20. She lets more than a week pass before watching the tape with a mother who lives across the river. Each beat is psychologically sound, but none costs more than the last, so the middle feels held rather than tense.

WHAT TO TRY

Cut the Part 6 doorknob or have it change something. Cut the Part 16 walk-out, or make it different in kind (she asks Cal and is stonewalled), so that Marcus's intervention in Part 20 is a

clean escalation. Shorten the gap before the tape or give it a concrete obstacle.

Summary and exposition placed directly after high points

Part 4 · Part 29 · Part 43

> *"It came up out of the river off the west bank like the back of something surfacing"*

WHY IT MATTERS

The bridle mechanics follow the "Dale" jam. The low-water grounding and staking follow the TTY strip and Marcus's reframe. Chapter 25's headline-and-county montage follows the commission vote. A drop after a peak is natural, but each of these runs a page or more of report with little forward motion, and the Chapter 25 montage buries its most interesting material (the eleven regulars who stop looking) in a paragraph.

WHAT TO TRY

Keep the essential mechanics in Part 4 but break them up with Cal's interjections. Halve the low-water opening. In Chapter 25, dramatise one encounter in full (the Dollar General clerk or a regular who stops waving) and reduce the rest to sentences.

Flashback chapters and chapter-outs carry the tempo

Part 18 · Part 31 · Part 47

> *"They worked side by side, in the cold, without their hands ever leaving the line."*

The dated flashback chapters arrive just when the present-day line needs pressure, and each ends on a physical image rather than commentary. Stopping Dale's chapter at "He almost has it." turns the reader's knowledge into dread and hands the momentum straight to the night test. The bell at Deal's and the flashing stairwell bulb ending Chapter 17 do the same at a quieter pitch. Protect these placements and endings in revision.

WALKTHROUGH

Part 4 to Part 5: Chapter 3: after the "Dale" jam, the cable-and-bridle paragraph and the regulars montage lose about a page of attention. The lunch on the engine box (the girders from Indiana) can be halved. Only Emmett's "never be closed for high water" remark carries weight.

Part 6: End of Chapter 3: the second approach to Dale's door is well written but flattens the opening in Part 15. Cut it or have it change something.

Part 10: Chapter 6 opens on Sunday the 18th, the day before Lorraine's Monday hall meeting in Chapter 5, so it steps back in time without signalling it. Date it or reorder, or the porch look at the window reads as coming after the meeting.

Part 12: Chapter 7: the stroke-day and care-routine passage between the pegboard and Cal's visit drifts. Trim it so Cal's "I know what that is" comes sooner.

Part 14: Chapter 8: the first-weekend summary (sheets, the bridge, the hand still going) repeats Hollis's

avoidance without adding anything. Compress it to a paragraph and get to April 9 faster.

Part 16: Chapter 9: the walk-out on "swing" is the weakest of three similar refusals. Cut it or change its kind. The "Leans" exchange with Idris is charming, but its stakes are low and it could be shortened.

Part 19: Chapter 11: the exchange of deck signs between Cal and Marcus delivers its point (Cal kept them all) early and then runs on. Lose a third of it.

Part 23: Chapter 13: the hearing, the flood, the log, the hook and "ask him" all happen on one afternoon. Move the rise and the log by a few days so the river isn't arranging itself around the hearing.

Part 26 to Part 27: Chapter 15: the bridge scene stacks structural metaphors (fixed and free bearings, the pinned member, the joint telling the truth). Keep the "fixed end" confession and one image. The rest delays the kiss and the bell.

Part 29: Opening of Chapter 17: halve the grounding and staking. It follows the strongest page in the book and has no later consequence.

Part 30: Chapter 17: the week-long delay before the tape reads as the author holding the scene back. Ray's testimony largely confirms what the reader already knows and is re-dramatised in the next chapter. Trim his account to the "mad at something" impression.

Part 31: Chapter 18: in the doorway, cut the sentences that re-explain the six-inch OWE sign and keep only what is new (his face, the half-raised hands, her not turning).

Part 33: Chapter 19: "Tell me why you left" is asked, deferred, then asked again word for word after the tape. Vary the second ask, or let her silence carry it.

Part 34 to Part 35: End of Chapter 19 into Chapter 20: Hollis's argument that he read the sign, followed by Lorraine's car reasoning, gives the reader the same conclusion twice in quick succession just before the climax. Let the tape make the case, cut the car passage to a few lines, and the chapter recovers when Lorraine walks into the kitchen.

Part 37: Chapter 21: the seven-paragraph say-back stalls the scene at its peak. Quote the lines new to Hollis and summarise the rest.

Part 38 to Part 40: Chapters 22 and 23: about eight processing scenes before the plot moves again with the hook. Compress Cal and Idris, and open Chapter 23 at Lorraine's knock.

Part 43: Chapter 25 is almost all summary straight after the book's most intense public scene. Dramatise one encounter about the county's withdrawal and reduce the rest to sentences.

Part 44: The load test's "takes a set" speech states Hollis's arc again. Keep the gauge reading zero and let the reader apply it.

Part 45: Chapter 26: Marcus's speech retells the night yet again. Keep the closed-room line, the "I don't", the students' raised hands and Janine's pencil, and cut the rest of the account.

Part 46 to Part 47: Chapter 27: trim what Chapters 18 and 21 already established (the stairs, "It's one truck") so the chapter carries what only Dale can give, and the drive to "He almost has it" tightens.

Part 49 to Part 50: Chapter 29: merge the cable and traveler block, choose either the bridge crossing or the relit house as the penultimate note, and cut the inventory paragraph before GA.

Market & submission

This is book-club literary fiction, and it keeps that category's main promises. The themes are ones readers will argue over: who has the right to soften a hard truth, what a hearing family owes a Deaf child, whether forgiveness can be split in two. The emotional payoff is substantial. The last-night swing, Emmett's admission that he hoped it would fail, and Hollis's limited forgiveness give the ending real weight. Something changes and the shape is clear. A literary reader will not feel short-changed at the close.

The opening is a strength in front of an agent. The first page gives a voice, a person whose job is reading bodies, and a question: why won't anyone fetch her across, and why is she here at all? By the end of the first chapter the hand gesture is on the table, the dead brother is present through objects, and the mother's lit windows are in view. The pitch is clean. A sign-language interpreter suspended for softening a dying man's prognosis comes home to a father who can't speak and keeps making one sign, and has to stop editing her family long enough to hear what happened the night her Deaf brother drowned. The professional offence mirroring the childhood habit is the kind of double hook agents can repeat in a single sentence. Positioned near True Biz and Everything I Never Told You, it has a recognisable shelf.

The risks come after the opening. First, an agent who requests the full manuscript will meet a long middle in which the reader already knows the secret and the protagonist doesn't. The book has given most of it away by Part 12 and all of it by Part 25, so the read through Parts 26 to 35 is waiting rather than wondering. Full-manuscript readers drop out exactly there. Second, at 101,433 words the book is just over the debut range, and the excess sits in identifiable places. Third, this manuscript will be read closely for its handling of Deaf characters and ASL, in a market that now has Deaf-authored literary fiction to compare it against. It needs that scrutiny before an agent applies it.

The following stand between this draft and querying: a structural decision about when the reader learns what Emmett did; a trim to around 92,000 to 95,000 words, taken mainly from the post-confession aftermath, the codas and the repeated retellings of April 9; a read by a Deaf reader fluent in ASL; and a continuity pass on dates and numbers, which this book invites readers to check.

The opening pages hold an agent

Part 1 · Part 2

> *“It was not sign language. It was just a man waving no across a river.”*

Agents decide on the first page. This one establishes voice, place and a protagonist defined by reading gesture, and sets the ferry's rules (the chain, the bell, the line) through action rather than

explanation. The repeated gesture arrives in Part 2, about 3% in, which is very early for literary fiction to state its central question. Little in the first five pages would make a reader stop.

An agent's full read will stall in the middle

Part 12 · Part 24 · Part 25 · Part 34

“It was not the bottom. There was a floor under that one.”

WHY IT MATTERS

An agent can say yes to the opening and still pass on the full. By Part 25 the reader has been told, from inside Emmett, that he read the sign and held the barge out of spite. Hollis then spends ten parts reaching what the reader already holds: Ray's testimony, the tape, the deductions in Part 34 and Part 35. That stretch is where a requested manuscript gets put down. The structure section covers the mechanics. In submission terms this is the biggest risk to a request turning into an offer.

WHAT TO TRY

Before querying, decide which engine runs the middle. Either hold back 'I read it' and the noon scene until the kitchen table, or commit to dramatic irony and cut the catch-up scenes so the reader is ahead of Hollis for fewer pages.

Deaf representation needs a Deaf reader before submission

Part 28 · Part 46 · Part 47

“It was not hearing English. The grammar bent toward his first language”

WHY IT MATTERS

The book argues that hearing people should not speak for Deaf people, and agents and editors will hold it to that standard. Two places invite challenge. Dale's letters are said to bend toward ASL grammar but read as fluent hearing English. Chapter 27 gives the book's only Deaf character an omniscient interior after 300 pages warning that nobody can know what happened on the deck. Neither is disqualifying, but either can sink a submission if a Deaf acquiring editor or reader flags it first.

WHAT TO TRY

Commission a paid read from a Deaf, ASL-fluent reader before querying, with particular attention to Dale's written voice, the glossed signs, the residential-school and CDI material, and Chapter 27. Be ready for agents to ask how the representation has been checked.

Length is just over the debut range

Part 38 · Part 39 · Part 40 · Part 49 · Part 50

WHY IT MATTERS

At 101,433 words the book sits just above the usual 70,000 to 100,000 for literary fiction. That alone won't get it rejected, but some agents filter on it, and the surplus is easy to find. After the

kitchen confession come about eight processing scenes (Cal, Marcus, Idris, Carol's letter, the cemetery, Emmett's reflection, Lorraine's Sunday). After the swing comes a run of codas (bridge crossing, cable, traveler block, the lights, the reflection, the barge under the bridge). The night of April 9 is retold in full four times.

WHAT TO TRY

Aim for 92,000 to 95,000 words. Cut first from the Chapter 22 aftermath and the Part 49–50 codas, then from the parts of each retelling that repeat what the reader already holds. That brings the query letter's word count comfortably inside the range.

A pitchable double hook with book-club themes

Part 10 · Part 11 · Part 18

“SHE DECIDE FOR ME.”

The Walter Brandt case and the 1994 supper table are the same act at two scales, and the book makes that link explicit through the hearing and the commission. This gives the pitch a clear spine and gives book clubs a ready question about whether a merciful lie is still a theft. Interpreting ethics, aphasia and a cable ferry about to be replaced by a bridge are each distinctive. Together they make a book that stands apart in a query stack.

The ending delivers the category's payoff

Part 48 · Part 49

“It came out whole. Three words, in order, with nothing missing, in the voice she had known all her life.”

Book-club fiction promises an emotional return, and this one earns it without sentimentality. The swing proves Dale right on the water, Emmett's late confession that he hoped it would fail stops the climax from becoming simple vindication, and Hollis's divided forgiveness refuses a tidy ending. Editors will see that the book knows how to finish, which counts in its favour when they weigh revision risk.

Coy withholding in the first chapter

Part 2 · Part 5

“and seen whatever there was to be seen”

WHY IT MATTERS

In the first chapter the narration hides the central night behind phrases like 'a night in April of 1994' and 'whatever there was to be seen'. Hollis would name it plainly in her own head. An agent reading the opening pages may take this as the author holding cards rather than the character avoiding them, which slightly undercuts otherwise strong pages.

WHAT TO TRY

Let Hollis think 'the night Dale drowned' outright in the first chapter. The open question is what happened that night, not whether something did.

Continuity slips in a book built on numbers

Part 7 · Part 9 · Part 45

“two people who had been married twenty-three years”

WHY IT MATTERS

The novel leans on exact figures: inches over the line, 640 feet, four minutes, years since. Readers will notice when those figures disagree. The marriage dates conflict (twenty-three years in 1994 against a 1970 wedding), the count of days since Lorraine first saw the hand is off, Dale is dropped from 'all four Kettering ferrymen' when he would be the fifth, and Cal's years on the ferry vary. Editors read slips like these as a sign of what copyediting the book will need.

WHAT TO TRY

Before querying, build a timeline and fact sheet (dates, ages, years, measurements, bulb count, hours logged) and reconcile every mention against it.

The numbers

Measured from the text by Evalie, not estimated by the AI.

Words	101,433
Dialogue	about 17% of words are inside quotation marks
Average sentence	9.6 words
Words ending in -ly	3.5 per 1,000 words
Perception and thought verbs (saw, felt, heard, knew, thought…)	14.6 per 1,000 words