

Entry #1: PERFECT MONSTERS

Query:

Fifteen-year-old Thirteen will do anything to get away from the scientists who engineered her human hybrid body, even when it means a one-way trip to the planet Olympia. So, she stows away on a ship taking a test flight to the planet.

Sixteen-year-old Ace is a Perfect, the culmination of a millennium of thoughtful human breeding. His job, besides looking perfect, is to keep the ship-dwellers happy until their bodies can adjust to Olympia's harmful atmosphere.

The details that I deleted from the query above are (a) unnecessary and (b) hard for an agent to wrap their mind around without reading the actual text; in other words, there are too many story-specific details included. What the writer needs to do here, in a third paragraph, is to offer a v. compact pitch about the ways in which these two worlds meet—and to demonstrate the clear plot arc that will be the focal point of the novel.

PERFECT MONSTERS is a 98,000-word YA science fiction novel that will appeal to fans of Beth Revis' ACROSS THE UNIVERSE.

First 250:

Taurus's shadow loomed down the dim corridor, the curved horn stretching toward my bare feet. I shifted the color of my skin to match the gray interior walls of Prometheus Labs. Normally, I took pity on my nearsighted brother and let him find me, but not today. This time I wanted to feel as cold as the stone walls that surrounded me. And nothing else.

If I were really the monster the scientists said I was, the halls would be littered with silent statues that couldn't hurt us. But I was only a genetically engineered facsimile of Medusa. Instead of snakes, my hair consisted of two long, stinging squid tentacles and eight useless squid arms, or squarms. My human face couldn't turn anyone to stone and my paralyzing squid toxins were useless because the scientists always wore safety suits.

Taurus grunted and then clomped down the hall, swinging his massive horned head back and forth. He was as bull-headed as any minotaur should be, but instead of hunting to kill, he wanted to help me feel better, even when that was impossible. Prometheus Labs created us to test the space program without endangering human life. He and my other brother, Wolf, were scheduled to go on a deadly one-way trip through space, leaving me alone to wonder if they survived. Hiding wouldn't keep anyone from leaving, but it would save me the pain of looking into their eyes, knowing it would be the last time.

Deleted: The last crew that landed there is assumed dead, which is fine with Thirteen. Humans like to send heroes to kill monsters, and she looks too much like Medusa for them to comfortably live with her. But her need for food and supplies forces her to find the human ship...which isn't as abandoned as she'd hoped.

Deleted: It's as close as he'll ever get to his childhood dream of being a hero, and he takes his duty seriously, until he accidentally ejects himself from the ship. A strange green girl with tentacles for hair fishes him out of the water, and he believes the venom in her sting is the key to acclimating the rest of his crew to Olympia. Unfortunately, she's okay with his crew being stuck on the ship forever.

Deleted: Despite growing up on different planets, Thirteen and Ace both spent their childhoods cooped up indoors. Liberation is almost as exhilarating as their growing feelings for each other. But they aren't as free as they think. They were both created for a purpose and their creators are determined to see them fulfil that purpose, even if it means they both end up dead.

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Comment [WJ1]: These 250 words don't work at all—there is way too much world-building and characterization here that doesn't actively contribute to a strong tension or plot arc. I would encourage the writer here to fully re-imagine the entire scene, and to start within a clearer action arc (whether that action is exterior or interior).

In other words, these 250 words tell us a lot—but they do v. little to show and structure the context for the unfolding story, and do v. little to invest the reader in the character or the unfolding story.

Be thinking about plot and pacing, especially with regards to scene structure—the way that you begin, move through, and end individual scenes: <https://bit.ly/2x38n55>. A huge part of the journey to publication, as well as career-building, requires a constant perfection of one's craft.

Also be thinking about the compactness of your query and your pages: <https://bit.ly/2QnD4u4>.

Entry #: POISON

Query:

My 80,000-word YA fantasy novel, POISON, is an African Snow White story meets the Lion King.

When Queen Machawi cursed fifteen-year-old Princess Kala to die by her sixteenth birthday, Kala flees the palace in search of a rare, red poison that will break the curse. (The other details don't seem to be necessary and contribute nothing to the tension arc.)

Along the way, she barely escapes frequent, near-fatal accidents and animal attacks due to the curse. She learns that Machawi is heavily taxing, enslaving, and killing their people. She also develops her magical ability to communicate with spirits through song and dance, but accidentally causes natural disasters whenever she tries to cast big spells. Still, through her magic, she befriends several animals that help her.

To complicate matters, she falls for Adofu, a cocky but charming, young warrior prince from a rival kingdom, who reluctantly agrees to be her guide. When she loses her magic fetish, Kala loses her ability to do magic as well. To save herself and her kingdom, she must believe in herself, regain her magical powers, and choose between destiny and true love.

First 250:

I stalked across the cracked, red savanna hunting bush rats, bow in hand. My charmed amulet buzzed under my wrap dress, warning of danger. I halted mid-step. A few paces ahead, a lioness crouched in the brown elephant grass that reached above my head. She snarled, eyes fixed on me, ears flattened.

As usual, I'd buried myself in deep dung, so to speak.

I tensed my legs to flee, but my feet refused to move. Slipping an arrow from my quiver, I nocked the arrow and took aim. Flies buzzed around me. One landed on my cheek, tickling my skin, but I didn't flinch.

The lioness's golden coat gleamed, giving off a musky odor. Her ribs expanded and contracted, and life force radiated from her sleek body. My palms grew sticky under the sweltering sun, but I hesitated to shoot such a spectacular creature unless I had to.

Instead, I tried casting a soothing spell on her—though in past attempts I'd been pecked by an ostrich, kicked by a zebra, and bitten by a python. I needed to improve if I wanted to pass my initiation into the magician's cult tomorrow.

Lowering my bow, I touched my ivory charm of a woman holding a child and gazed into the lion's yellow eyes, rocking from foot-to-foot in rhythm with her flicking tail. Humming a made-up tune, I reached my spirit out to hers and imagined a strip of light flowing from my hand to her head, attaching us.

Comment [WJ2]: This is a wonderful pitch. Have you read Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone*? It's a beautiful Africa-inspired novel.

Deleted: Fifteen-year-old Princess Kala—who would rather hunt than marry and become queen—learns her stepmother,

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Comment [WJ3]: This doesn't contribute to a plot or tension arc—it's a lot of unnecessary detail. I would suggest cutting all of this.

Comment [WJ4]: All of this needs to be re-worked. The query gives us no sign of a clear plot or tension arc—how does the story evolve, change, and tend toward a particular climax? What is the stake, here, and how is Kala going to fight against that which threatens her in an immediate sense?

Comment [WJ5]: These 250 words don't work—the writer attempts to build out tension by telling us about a small conflict here, the encounter of the main character with the lioness, but rather than build tension, the scene falls v. flat. The entire scene needs a clearer (re)structuring.

I am also concerned that the writer is choosing to build out tension with a scene that isn't necessary for the story; this reads like content that is being used to build out the world, instead of build out the actual plot or tension arc that is necessary to capture the minds of readers. World-building details in the first 50 pages should be totally minimal, and included only where essential, on the most part; the focus needs to be on sparking to life an interest in the character, an attachment to that character, in context of some kind of tension *felt* or *shown*, be that caused by things interior or exterior.

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Entry #3: THE PENDRAGON'S SON

Query:

Seventeen-year-old half-Spanish Prince Vael doesn't believe fate has the last word, since he has the power to alter it. When his surly half-brother Mordred arrives at the castle, haunted by the prophecy that he'll destroy Camelot, Vael defies his superstitious kingdom by taking Mordred as his squire.

Vael vows to rewrite his brother's fate, but this dangerous gift has a hefty cost—he saves a life only if one is lost.

~~When Mordred's sorceress mother steals Camelot's greatest defense and frames Mordred to ensure he won't stray from his destiny, Vael's run out of time for doubts.~~

Though Vael pursues the sorceress to clear his brother's name, her alluring apprentice, Nimue, entangles him in her own devious game—one that draws him in like a moth to a flame. She might hold the key to understanding Vael's unstable powers. If she doesn't kill him first.

With the sorceress' traps ensnaring Camelot and Mordred, Vael must convince Nimue to help him stop the prophecy. If not, he'll either have to watch his father and kingdom fall, or kill his only friend—his brother.

Complete at 95,000 words, THE PENDRAGON'S SON is a standalone #ownvoices YA fantasy with series potential. An excerpt received the Superior Award from the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) Creative Writing Contest and the ACSI Regional Creative Writing Festival. I was a finalist in Pitch America 2016 and Author Mentor Match 2017, and was chosen by Kelly Hopkins as an unofficial mentee in PitchWars 2016.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

First 250:

As I hurried down the castle's vast stone corridor to meet my half-brother for the first time, his name echoed around me, uttered like a curse: Mordred.

The vaulted doorway of the Great Hall loomed ahead, hewn from stone older than the ages. Squaring my shoulders and forcing my spine straight as a sword, I marched toward the raised dais, careful to keep my pace steady—calm and collected as a Prince of Camelot should be. At least I hoped I looked that way. Sometimes it felt like the kingdom still saw me as the timid yet overly emotional boy, who worshiped the ground his father walked on—but those days were long gone. My muscles strained as my legs urged me forward. Every step was too fast, yet the dais still seemed far away.

Armored knights filled either side of the high-ceilinged hall. I passed them and focused straight ahead on the three thrones. As hard as I tried, I couldn't block out the poisonous words infusing the room, burning my ears.

"How is that bastard Mordred still alive?" a knight to my right sneered.

"Vermin never dies easy," another said.

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Deleted: After years with only swords and tomes as companions, Vael's tired of being alone, separated from his peers by his mixed heritage and strange ability. He finally finds a true friend in his hot-blooded half-brother—a boy even more familiar with rejection and loneliness than he is.

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Comment [WJ6]: Everything here reads like way too much detail, and you never follow-up on—or build out a complete arc for—the tension that you propose in the foundational part of your pitch. This entire part of the query needs to be reworked and made more compact.

Deleted: Fantasy

Comment [WJ7]: This is all detail that reads like it can be integrated later. I think the writer here can either begin later into this scene, the moment that a clearer action-based tension begins, in context of the immediate scene, or restructure this entire scene in order to immediately place the reader onto a clear tension arc.

Remember also to **show** rather than **tell**; telling actively kills tension.

Something like this, i.e.:

Mordred.

The name echoed around me, like a curse spit from teeth, down the corridor. My robes caught between my legs as I rushed.

"How is that bastard still alive?" a knight to my right sneered.

"Vermin never dies easy," another said.

The words caught in my stomach, and their poison infused the throne room. My half-brother bore an imperial reputation, and I could not avoid it.

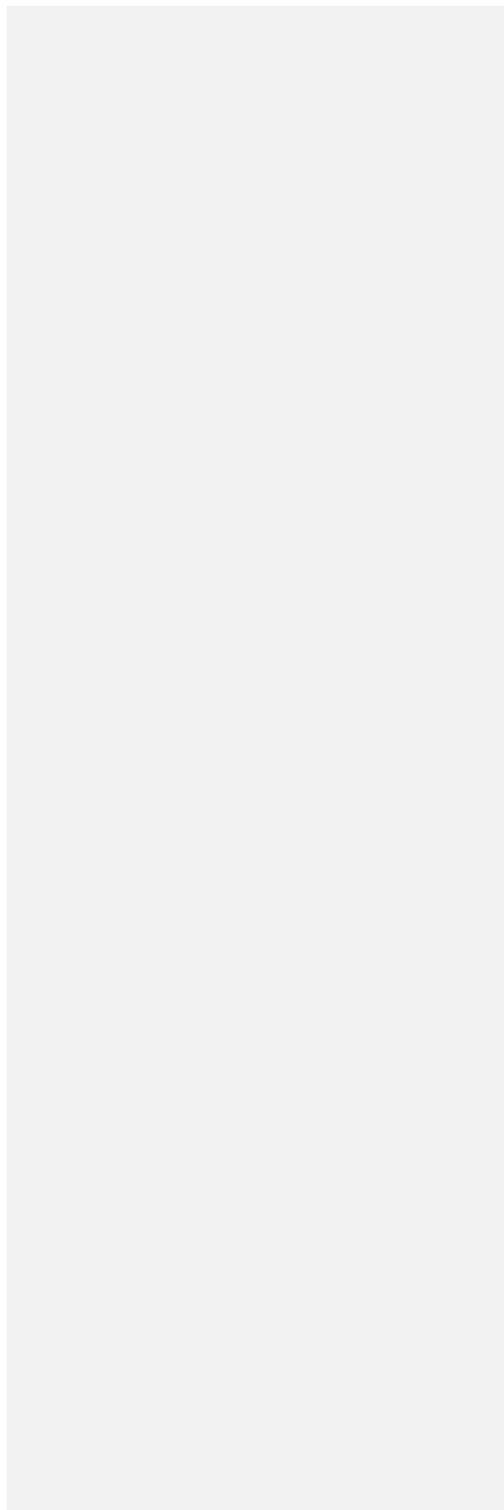
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I bit my tongue, not for the first time that day. Such disrespect, all because of an unreliable prophecy. But superstition had formed the kingdom's unstable foundation, supporting a castle built of large egos, fear, and barely-muted hostility.

My boots clipped against the scuffed stones. No point in arguing with them. I'd be wasting my breath.



Entry #4: THE CURSE OF THE MOON SPIRIT

Query:

Sold to pay off her family's debt, misfortune plagues seventeen-year-old Mitsuko. She'll do anything to prevent her sister from succumbing to the same fate. Praying to the Moon Spirit, Tsukiyomi, for help, she receives his offer: her eternal servitude for the safety of her sister.

Desperate, she agrees to his terms and leaves her family behind. As Tsukiyomi showers her with gifts—and his advances—Mitsuko soon finds herself falling for him. But a curse set on Tsukiyomi threatens to end what Mitsuko is starting to crave, and the death of the deity will destroy more than just her world. Only she can find a cure for her love before his death disrupts the balance of heaven, plunging the earth into chaos.

Thank you for taking the time to look over my pitch for my 65,000-word YA [fantasy romance, inspired by Japan](#), THE CURSE OF THE MOON SPIRIT.

First 250:

The first hint of trouble came when Father summoned us inside before the sweltering August sun had a chance to set. ~~Father didn't like work to go unfinished around the farm, especially right before harvest. Dusty from replanting red beans, my sister and I took turns patting each other down outside our ramshackle little house. I leaned a hand against the large shutter attached to the yellowing walls of our house, yanking it back as a piece of the cracked wood sliced the skin on my finger.~~

~~"Ouch." I sucked away the pain. Another splinter. Mother patiently removed each with the same attentive care she gave our teetering house, keeping all her children and worn-out home clean if not structurally sound.~~

~~Our older brother, Yasahiro strode past us, already having gotten most of the dirt from his clothes. I gave my little sister a final pat and waved away the dust cloud. My throat burned in anticipation of cool well water that I would soon have once Father delivered his news.~~

~~"You're good-go on," I said.~~

~~Yuki's tired face stretched into a smile, "Thanks, we better hurry, don't want Father to yell at us more than he probably already is."~~

~~Biting my tongue, I nodded. Nothing can keep Father from his favorite pastime.~~

~~"You go in, I'll just be a minute."~~

~~"Alright."~~

~~She hurried inside leaving me to stare at the shabby straw woven mat we used as a door.~~

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Comment [WJ8]: Figure out what exactly you want to communicate here—is it Japan? Japanese stories, or mythology?

Also: I would encourage you to read EAST by Edith Pattou, especially to look at the very beginning part of that novel for some clarity on scene structure for yourself, per the feedback below; I think it needs work.

Comment [WJ9]: I would cut all of this and start later into the scene—all of it reads like unnecessary detail, especially following your first sentence, which sets up the reader for a v. profound and intense and tense scene (what is the trouble?), but the rest of this first set of 250 words completely deflates the promise of tension.

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Entry #5: THE UNTOUCHABLE

Query:

I am writing to you because of your request for diverse YA retellings. My 76,000-word contemporary YA fantasy, THE UNTOUCHABLE, retells India's most famous epic, The Ramayana. The manuscript won the PNWA 2017 contest.

Vikram is an eighteen-year-old Hindu boy who hears strange voices and is in love with a girl from a higher caste. The only person who understands and accepts him is his best friend Aziz, a six-foot-tall, Star Wars-obsessed Muslim.

Vikram is an untouchable, a caste so reviled their very touch is considered spiritually polluting. But Aziz is a Muslim and doesn't give a damn. Vikram isn't even allowed near the girl he loves. It's the way India works—caste, religion, and money define you.

As Vikram scours the trash for parts to put together a bicycle for his little sister, he learns his village is about to be flooded to make a new dam. They will all become refugees. While praying to save his sister and the girl he loves, he hears a voice. The goddess of the river is willing to give Vikram the power to stop the dam from being built, but he'll have to pay a high price. The power will turn him into a true untouchable—an invisible shell will grow around him making him at once invulnerable and someone who can't be loved. No one will be able to touch him or embrace him again. Yet Vikram accepts this and enlists Aziz to help him save the village.

Stopping the dam proves to be more difficult than Vikram ever imagined. Standing against him is Sanjay Kapoor, India's most prominent corporate giant, who turns out to be Ravana King of Rakshasas. Vikram finds that India doesn't only have a million gods, it also has a million hidden demons, and they're all on Kapoor's side, fighting to flood Vikram's world entirely.

Now to save his sister and rescue the girl he loves, Vikram must rely on the friendship of his Muslim friend and open himself to the voices he's struggled to silence.

With its exploration of contemporary India and rich traditions of gods and legends, THE UNTOUCHABLES is Neil Gaiman's AMERICAN GODS meets Slumdog Millionaire.

My previous publications include short fiction in The Penmen Review and the nonfiction book The Top 30 Problems in Emergency Medicine (from which publisher? what year?). I was born in India and grew up in Milwaukee. I still remember the time I spent in my father's village in India, and this is where the novel is set. My best friend growing up was a Muslim kid down the street, and that friendship helped form me. Thank you for your time.

First 250:

As if you were on fire from within. The moon lives in the lining of your skin.

Neruda

Chapter 1

I was supposed to hate Aziz like a mongoose hates a snake, circling with teeth bared, trapped in an endless staredown. And that's how it would have been, if Aziz hadn't told me to stick gum in my ears and I hadn't been stupid enough to do it.

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- Deleted: is a contemporary YA fantasy and retelling of
- Deleted: It is complete at 76,000 words and was one of the winners in
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- Deleted: writing
- Deleted: In India, Hindus and Muslims aren't supposed to get along, but a Hindu teen and his Muslim best friend are about to face the King of Rakshasas. Only the strength of their friendship can prevent the destruction of everything they love. .

- Comment [WJ10]: This is too much detail. You need to find a way to sum up all of this, with a clear tension/plot arc, in one paragraph—as short and compact as possible. The purpose of the query is to incite a thirst in the reader to learn more after an introduction conceptually; this weighs with too much detail and context, which a writer reserves for the novel itself to build out.
- Deleted: Readers who enjoyed Neil Gaiman's American Gods or loved the movie Slumdog Millionaire will appreciate The Untouchable for
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"Nothing will keep things quiet like gum," Aziz said.

At ten, he was a mess of curly hair and sharp-eyed intensity. He took a pre-chewed piece out of his mouth and handed it over. "Make sure to stick it in deep." We were the same age, but Aziz towered over me with more confidence than he had a right to.

I rolled the minty-smelling mess in my fingers. "You're sure this will work?" I asked, trying to push past my hesitation. In India, Hindus and Muslims kick the hell out of each other—or glare across the village and dream about it. But I was tired of being hunted, and would take even a Muslim's advice to escape. India has millions of gods. I didn't want their voices in my head any longer.

We'd come out to the riverbank as the sun rose so no one would see us together, but the world was awake early. A thousand birds called in the trees, and the chant of women's prayers in the temple reached us.

When this writer feels like the manuscript is ready for an agent to read, I'd be happy to consider a query mentioning a request for it and the first ten pages.

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Comment [WJ11]: This is all v. good and tight, and I love the voice and promise of humor here. I think the scene structure breaks a little bit, problematically, after this excerpt; see my comments on the remainder of this below.

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Comment [WJ12]: Following from my comments above: You start the scene building out one particular tension arc, which reads well—I am curious to know now what will happen with the gum stuck in ears.

Then you launch into a mention of the differences between Hindus and Muslims, and veer off onto another conversation—the direct link to which isn't clear to me. Why this detail, now? What does the gum have to do with escaping?

And then you backtrack into the history of this scene without doing anything to follow-up on the tension established in the first part, and your tension entirely breaks. As a reader, I am annoyed. ☹️

This could use work, but you have a great starting point at the top of the scene.

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