The details of beta reading

written by Holly
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By Holly Lisle

Joel asked how someone becomes a beta reader.

I'm trying something different this time. Used to be, I didn't ask for the help of outside beta readers. The only people who saw the manuscript before I sent it off to my editor were the people in my household and me. But the people in my household got tired of doing crits.

The last few books, I've had a friend or two look over things and let me know if they found any problems. Having outside eyes has proven such a huge help that I'm trying something different now.

I asked for a very small number of readers who could take a finished project, read it very quickly, and give me a finished, formatted report – page number, line number, error – about 36 hours after I sent the manuscript that would answer the following questions. I wanted to know: where are the spellos, where are the typos, where are the grammatical errors, where are the internal inconsistencies, where have I dropped threads? This would be my fast turnaround team.

When I got their reports, I cut and pasted them into a text file, sorted the text file by reverse numerical order by page number, then line number (so that I'm working through the book backwards), and started fixing things. I'm working backwards so that I don't screw up the page and line numbers – if I went from front to back, the first big change would completely trash everything that came later.

I also asked for another small, though slightly larger, number of readers who would tear the book apart over about three

months. From them, I wanted a different sort of answers – where did the book slow down, where did characters act out of character, where did the story work especially well, where did it not work at all, where have I missed the boat or introduced continuity errors related to the previous two books? This group is my slow turnaround team, and they're still hard at work.

I realize that there are probably a pretty good handful of people who would enjoy doing this. I asked the site moderators first – they volunteer a tremendous amount of time and effort on the site, and it couldn't run without them. So I wanted to give them first choice. Had the number of people I needed not volunteered from the moderator pool, I would have asked staffers next, and following that, would have posted an open request in the community. But the list filled up with moderators.

I may use this same process next time, or may try something different. But I have to say that so far, this has been the best pre-send-off prep I've ever been able to give a manuscript, and I'm looking forward to finding out what the slow turnaround team comes up with.

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