

Dear Caitlin Fisher,

Thank you for sharing the completed manuscript of *Rivers & Roads* with me. This story has a strong bite and provides a space to solve the mystification of Juniper's familial history as it unravels. There is something very raw within this world you have created—one of grief, curiosity, and teenage angst. This book will create a great escape for all readers alike, immersing them in an unforgettable mystery that may have them questioning their own family matters. I look forward to continuing to work on this manuscript with you.

What struck me about this story is the beauty in the prose and setting. You have honed the talent of creating an enchanting existence out of something usually perceived as ugly or grotesque. This extraordinary talent creates a powerful dynamic between the reality of the moment and Liv's perception of the moment. An excellent example is in chapter three, page 35, where Juniper and Liv go swimming in the leaf and grime-ridden pool. The exact paragraph I'm thinking about is: "We stripped to our underwear, both shivering in the cool night air. Juniper jumped into the green, leaf-littered water first—I was sure that none of those boys cleaned it, but it hardly mattered." Despite knowing that the content of this pool is dirty and, quite frankly, repulsive, the reader yearns to be present at that moment. The transformation of repugnance into purity. Other fantastic examples include the beginning of chapter five, discussing the trash and rot of the river while still painting it in a nostalgic light, and chapter 11, page 105, when retelling the scent and muskiness of Warp and Weft and the Double Dub. Providing this level of detail accurately represents the reality of this Massachusetts town while still playing into the sentimental value it holds for Liv.

Another aspect of this manuscript that is wonderfully done is the entanglement of themes and personal connection. To begin with the most apparent theme of roads and navigational

direction, the dedication to providing deep value to each highway and geographical orientation is to be applauded. What struck me the most was Liv's, and her father's, directional superstitions, emphasizing driving north and fear of heading south. This is woven through the manuscript in a curious manner that makes the reader question the value of this trepidation. Having this superstition slowly unfold and dissipate was a valuable tool, showing Liv's dedication to unlearning habits while still working through why they are ingrained within her mind. I also want to note the presence of family, while seemingly obvious or straightforward, is portrayed in a complex and heart-wrenching way that proves the importance of belonging and identity. Through disconnection of parental bonds (i.e., Liv and Granny) in contrast with the ideal connection (i.e., Sage and Holly), as well as "found family" (i.e., Liv and Stuart), there is exposure to differing dynamics and the yearning for something more. Each younger character holds a distinct perspective regarding parenthood and childhood, begging for what the other has (i.e., Juniper desires a mother figure, Liv craves a loving parent, and Sage wishes his mother was less obsessive). They are all blind to the reasoning for their parents' attitudes and their dedication to finding comfort elsewhere, which slowly begins to come undone and reveal the true nature of these relationships. It's wonderfully done.

While this manuscript holds incredible purpose and intensity, there are some aspects that could be improved. My biggest grievance is that the ending doesn't feel completely earned. There is dissatisfaction and conflict about the outcome—which could be purposeful but should be molded to feel more deserved. The most jarring aspect of the ending was the absence of clarity on Juniper's death. With the continuous referral to the confusion of whether Juniper's death was a suicide or accident, the entire plotline felt snuffed out without the explanation or grand reveal. The purpose of Liv's visit is to delve into Juniper's accident and familial

background, yet she calls it quits when the mother mystery is discovered. This forms confusion about how Juniper felt about Granny being her mother. This also creates a lack of emotional resolution for Liv, which makes it unbelievable that she can move on so quickly. Given Liv's dedication to discovering Juniper's last moments, it seems the topic is dropped too quickly. While we cannot personally hear it from Juniper, perhaps Holly can give insight at the end, given that she was the last person to see Juniper before her death.

Furthermore, the final three chapters of the manuscript feel insignificant and unresolved. After a profound family discovery, which presumably would put anyone into a deep shock, possibly spiraling into anger or depression. Psychologically, Liv has been through a lot in just a few days, yet seems unbothered after the initial betrayal. There isn't a slow unfolding, but rather a complete turn-around to create a happy ending. While ending on a high or hopeful note is rewarding, it must come after everything is tied up. I recommend replacing one of the ending chapters with one that revolves around Liv's confusion, grieving, distance, and then facing a point of self-discovery and coming to terms with the situation at hand. There needs to be a deeper point of reflection.

On the topic of Liv's emotional turbulence, I would love to see more of Stuart using Liv as a replacement for the space Juniper used to hold. This idea is touched upon, such as him calling her "Juniper" in chapter 6, on page 53. There are also slight inclusions when he asks her to stay in Juniper's room and refers to her and Sage as "kids," as if to push them into a place of child-like siblinghood. These moments create an eeriness that genuinely grasps the reader's attention and forces them to crave more. Incorporating more of this would not only add tension and create more personal disturbance on Liv's account, but could also assist in making the ending chapters more brutal (in the best way). The twist of the family connection is impactful,

but could use more drive to create an overall feeling of betrayal and abandonment. This can be done as subtly or dramatically as you see fit, whether that be just him having Liv fill this empty hole through presence and actions, or going further into emotional and/or physical delusion of seeing Liv as Juniper.

Going further into characters, while individually they are strong and unique, there is often a disconnect on how they develop in relationships—primarily when focusing on romantic ties. Beginning with Liv and Sage’s relationship, I am first uncertain if there needs to be a romantic connection between them. The teenage crush in their past is precious and forms a bond between the two. This connection is beautiful and valuable. I especially adore the ice skating rink scene within chapter fifteen, beginning on page 186. This creates a nostalgic sense of first love and builds tension with Juniper’s feelings about the requited flirtation. However, once they reach adulthood, the romance feels to have fizzled out, leaving their relationship stiff and forced. They are both experiencing grief and trauma; perhaps it would be beneficial to keep their connection platonic—while still reflecting on their past crush. Both of them desperately need friendship and someone to lean on while experiencing this tumultuous journey. I understand the interest in wanting a love interest, I just found these two better left in the past.

As for Bertie, the second love interest, there’s much room for improvement. Bertie is a dynamic and fierce character. While she may fall into a few classic tropes, her character may be the most interesting, yet underdeveloped, throughout the manuscript. First, to touch on her as a character, it would be beneficial to delve deeper into who she is and why her presence is essential. When removed from the manuscript, the story's main plotline is unaffected, making me question the need for her. That being said, her character could be vital with more implementation of her presence and purpose. Make her exist for a reason that either moves the plot forward or

enhances the character growth of Liv, which flows into my next easily fixable conflict. In chapter 12, page 121, the kiss between Bertie and Liv, and the admission of feelings following shortly after feel out of place and too sudden. There is no prior romantic build-up or Liv's inner monologue to back up the existence of this scene. Especially given that afterward, there is hardly any mention of this kiss or forming a crush. Bertie is then only included in two more scenes—with the walkie-talkie app in chapter 13 and when they briefly meet at Boarding House Park in chapter 17—yet, she is used as an excuse not to be with Sage on page 257. I'm wondering if Bertie is to be kept, as I find her to be a compelling character, if we can delve deeper into her character as a whole, as well as her romantic relationship with Liv. Incorporating her in more chapters and building up romantic tension prior to the kiss. Then, rather than dropping her character, creating more tension—the wanting to be with her but knowledge of being emotionally unavailable. Including more scenes between just the two of them to expose this crush and cause it to grow and build a deep need within the reader for them to end up together—which, in the end, would be your choice. Or, if romance is off the table, try to have her as a constant friend and a more present entity in the sleuthing and uncovering of the mystery.

The last central point I'd like to touch on is the pacing—explicitly referring to the plotline. While many of the beginning chapters are beautifully written and engaging, it feels as though the actual plotline of the story doesn't pick up until chapter fourteen, around page 140, when Sage and Liv decide to go to Holly's to ask questions about Juniper's final text. Given that the genre of this novel is mystery, there didn't seem to be a call to action until this page, leaving the first half of the book just to be exposition. Given Liv's dedication to discovering the truth behind Juniper's demise, it feels like it takes too long to begin uncovering the mystery. While small clues are implemented, such as Stuart refusing to discuss Juniper's mother and the

conversation about the final text messages received, there isn't much digging or discovery. It's too slow of a start. I'm wondering if it's possible to cut some bulk in the chapters—and the entirety of chapter 8, given the absence of new information provided within it—to create space to explore the mystery, character dynamics, and expressions. Or, perhaps implement more scenes of Liv actively searching for clues and answers. A good spot for this would be in chapter 10, when Liv wakes up with a sore throat and is confined in Juniper's old bedroom for three days. Rather than skipping over this fact, it could be interesting to see Liv using this time to snoop around and start coming up with a few hypotheses of her own.

Below, I have included a bulleted list of more lines, moments, and other details that stood out to me—positively and negatively. They are placed chronologically with their assigned page number for easy assessment.

- **Page 4:** The opening is captivating and instantly draws the reader in; however, using the phrase “plague times” feels melodramatic.
- **Page 5:** Beautiful use of language. One of my favorite lines is on this page—“the banks of the river swelling and throbbing with brackish water like the feathered belly of the mourning doves that nested in the gray birch trees in our shared backyard.”
- **Page 7:** I love the quirkiness of the name “Ole Granny Saddle Shoes.”. However, I don't know why she requested to be called this—especially as a child is learning to speak.
- **Page 9:** Would the police reports be able to determine if the accident was a suicide or accident? Given skidmarks on roads, tire prints in the mud, or autopsy reports.
- **Page 11:** I love the juxtaposition of Granny's persona and her Mickey Mouse scrubs. I'm curious what her job is at the hospital. Is she a nurse? A pediatrician? A receptionist?

- **Pages 20-21:** Dialogue between Liv and Stuart seems very natural. This trend continues with most casual conversations. Characters don't sound robotic.
- **Page 23:** Despite Liv telling Stuart she doesn't want to stay in Juniper's room, and an empty guest room is available, she moves in anyway. Expand on why.
- **Pages 31-34:** Great job at entering the mind and experience of a teenager. It all feels natural and in tune with the idea of girlhood and quick crushes.
- **Page 34:** I love this scene where Liv sees the album with Granny's face on it. This depiction is authentic and enthralling.
- **Page 40:** The description of Juniper's room is well done, detailed, and makes every inch of the room feel like a relic. I would love to see more scenes within this location.
- **Pages 44-46:** Fishing for garbage is a unique experience that is grotesque, but fascinating to read. This adds an insight into life living in Haverhill.
- **Page 52:** This is the only instance (until the end) where Liv senses Juniper— spiritually, emotionally, or metaphysically. It could be interesting to add more scenes like this.
- **Page 55:** Despite the examples of Juniper's obsession with the sea and drowning, Liv doesn't seem to connect her death with these stories, which seems like an oversight.
- **Page 72:** There are continuous comments about Juniper not acting like herself, but the reader doesn't see this. While maintaining Liv's POV, I would love to delve deeper into how Juniper acted out of character.
- **Pages 75-79:** Why are they secretly buying weed? Marijuana was legalized in MA in 2016, and during COVID, many dispensaries were still open and delivery became more prominent. Sage is old enough, so it feels outdated for him to do this.

- **Pages 93-94:** The sudden cold shoulder towards Sage feels sudden and undeserved. Due to the lack of context or prior conflict given to explain the ghosting, this feels forced and unbelievable. Even the small inner monologue provided feels far-fetched.
- **Pages 99-103:** This fight between Sage and Liv is over-dramatic and too vicious. Since there has been no prior tension or anger between the two, it doesn't feel like a break, but rather a ploy to push the plot forward.
- **Page 104:** I am curious as to why Granny would demand Liv to work with Signor, given that he knows the big secret. Why is she not cautious here if she's taken such significant steps to keep said secret?
- **Pages 104-105:** The character of Signor is charismatic and comedically alluring.
- **Pages 118-119:** I love the psychic storyline in connection with Liv's father. It adds dimension to his character and creates a different form of sorrow for his death. I would love to see more of this storyline, or at least of Jessica Del Rio.
- **Page 129:** The paragraph of Liv fantasizing about having Sage and Bertie physically present with her could be an excellent place to add some of that romantic tension and inner-emotions previously mentioned.
- **Pages 136-137:** Good introduction to the Granny and Serenity subplot. This is written in a way that is clear and entrancing.
- **Page 140:** Someone with a learner's permit is allowed to drive with anyone over 21, which Sage is. So, Stuart's complaints about fears of her driving aren't incredibly valid.
- **Pages 145-147:** If Holly was the one who told Juniper the truth, why not be honest with Sage and Liv? She has already broken the promise and exposed secrets.

- **Page 146:** What stopped Holly from telling Juniper earlier? There are no stakes or loyalties that are keeping her silent.
- **Page 156:** There is a delicacy to this page that oozes with the significance of girlhood morphing from childhood to teenage best friends. It's beautiful and relatable.
- **Pages 160-161:** This discussion seems like something the two of them would have shared years prior. Perhaps even as a form of bonding as children. I'm not sure I believe Liv would keep this hidden after it bothered her "for, like, ever."
- **Page 177:** The proposal plot line feels incomplete. Despite Sage's confession of wanting to be there for the proposal, his not following Holly and Glenn when they walk away contradicts this idea.
- **Pages 184-188:** The entire ice rink scene is delightful, full of joy and light laughs. You have captured a moment that represents a playfulness within friend groups and nostalgia.
- **Page 190:** Juniper's comment of "she gets *everything* she wants" comes across as though Juniper is romantically interested in Sage and is jealous of his flirtation with Liv. This changes the tone of many scenes moving forward between the two.
- **Page 195:** Sage talks of DeeDee in the present tense, making it seem like the relationship is ongoing. She is then not mentioned further. This makes it appear as though Sage is cheating and makes his character less likable. Is this purposeful?
- **Pages 207-214:** The unraveling of Signor and the album is done wonderfully. This subplot helps move the story along, and is also a strong use of storytelling within storytelling. The connection of clues and assumptions sprinkled throughout the manuscript to get to this point is also effective.

- **Page 211:** If Granny has been dying her hair gray since teenagehood, letting her roots grow out after Juniper's death seems uncharacteristic. I understand its intent, but the hair dye existed long before Juniper's birth.
- **Pages 221-222:** Uncertain how Liv came to the idea that Stuart wasn't Juniper's dad. There were no clues to back this up and it seems unjustified.
- **Page 224:** In an older, sepia-toned photograph, is it possible to make out a coat within a closet and see tears in the pockets? It may be more believable if Granny wore it in the photo.
- **Page 225:** While Liv is spiraling, wouldn't she know it'd be impossible to be twins? Would Liv have thoughts about how this is possible before actually figuring it out?
- **Page 229:** The explanation for Granny not wanting to be referred to as "mom" feels unlikely since "Granny" is essentially "mom's mom."
- **Page 231:** How would Liv not know Juniper's age as her best friend? Was Juniper also unaware of her actual age? If so, wouldn't she have found out when she had to get her driver's license—given the need for proof of birth?
- **Page 231:** First time mentioning the name "Veronica" and sharing a story of her death. Why did everyone lash out at Liv when she questioned this rather than repeating the story that was agreed upon?
- **Page 232:** While I understand the circumstances, Liv calling Juniper "our sister" after having a present and future romantic entanglement with Sage blurs the family tree.
- **Pages 243-247:** Uncertain if this historic walkthrough is necessary. I understand the purpose of the title "saddle shoes," but it lacks authority.

- **Pages 257-258:** I find the full-circle moment of ending the manuscript within the water to be masterful. A moment where weight is lifted off the chest and recognition of one's life and value is preserved.
- **A general note:** I'm not sold on the title. While it sums up much of the book, I am worried that since this is your debut novel, it may be buried under more popular works with the same title.

Thank you again for sharing *Rivers & Roads* with me. This manuscript is truly beautiful, showcasing the complexity of family matters, the impact of grief, and how secrets can quickly and dangerously unravel. I hope that my notes are helpful for your revisions and for delving deeper into the purpose and execution of this manuscript. Please review my suggestions and submit your edits by November 1st. Do not hesitate to reach out if you have any questions, concerns, or comments.

Best,

Ava Sofia Bratt