

Dian Greenwood
Portland, OR

RE: *Bert & Eileen*

Dear Dian Greenwood,

Thank you so much for allowing our class to serve as editors for your manuscript, *Bert & Eileen*. It's been a privilege to learn through working with you and your book this term—and thank you for coming to visit our class and give us more context for your background and influences in this work! It was wonderful to hear you talk so passionately about your writing processes, professional experiences, and inspirations.

I was very impressed with your manuscript, and I often found myself getting drawn into and lost in Eileen's story—so much so that at times I would finish a chapter and realize that I'd forgotten to take any notes! It is clear from reading this manuscript that you have a deep and thorough understanding of the complicated family dynamics that arise in situations of alcohol use disorder, and I really appreciate how clearly your expertise shines through, even in such a character-driven work. In this developmental edit letter, I will primarily address issues with setting, characters, plot, and narration. I will also offer a few suggestions for revisions. Of course, it is always your choice as the author to accept or ignore them. My intention is to provide a fresh set of eyes and a new perspective on your work, and to offer suggestions as a member of a more general audience.

Bert & Eileen is centered, broadly speaking, around the ways in which alcohol use disorder affects families and is passed down through generations. These themes are explored through the lens of Eileen Bishop—a retiree, mother, grandmother, alcoholic, and newly widowed woman. It is a story about transformation and people's ability to grow, change, and find peace within themselves. It is a testament to the possibility for resolution and forgiveness, even without the guarantee of a happy ending. Have I accurately summarized your intentions for this manuscript?

During our meeting, you mentioned that your target audience is women of a perimenopausal age and older—or, as Eileen would say, “women of a certain age.” While I agree that this is certainly the

primary audience, I see a strong possibility for an expanded secondary audience of younger women and/or people with lived experience in families coping with alcohol use disorder.

Manuscript Overview

Bert & Eileen opens with a view of Eileen on the train to Pendleton, taking her husband Bert to a detox and rehabilitation center, where he will be treated for alcohol use disorder. Unfortunately, Bert never leaves the facility, dying in detox before the doctors can reach his wife. As Eileen comes to terms with being a widow, she must also navigate a number of other interpersonal difficulties. Her struggle with her sister to get their mother's affairs in order after her death. The ever-increasing concern from her best friend surrounding her drinking habits. Her strained and distant relationship with her daughter, and her desire to reconnect with her granddaughter. The pressure from her children to sell her house. Her secret, devastating financial struggles. After a fender bender leaves Eileen reeling and reporting to AA meetings, one thing becomes increasingly clear: perhaps Bert isn't the only one with a dependence on alcohol.

Setting & Time Period

Time Period Inconsistencies

There are a few timeline inconsistencies that don't quite align with when the story is set. If Eileen is 69 years old during the manuscript, this means she was born in 1926. Her headstone, though, in **Chapter 30** has her birth year listed as 1934. Additionally, it's established in **Chapter 4** that Eileen was 8 or 9 years old for the winters during WWII when her grandparents lived next door. But if she was born in 1926, she would have been 13 at the youngest when the war first began.

There are also some inconsistencies in Bert and Eileen's relationship. It's established that Bert drove a 1956 Chevy when he and Eileen first got together. Yet, if they had been married for 45 years before his death, they would have started dating before even 1950.

Setting Quirks

Overall, you've painted a very clear picture of Portland in this manuscript, but I did pick up on a few setting quirks as I was reading. First is the distance between places. It is never clearly established how far Pendleton or Hood River are from Portland, how long Eileen is traveling on the train when she goes to these places. Additionally, Milwaukie (spelled like the Milwaukee in Wisconsin in the manuscript) is described as being hopelessly far away from Portland, when in reality it is really only 10-15 minutes away from downtown.

Something that may help with this is establishing what neighborhood Eileen lives in. Each Portland neighborhood really has its own personality, and understanding where she lives might give further insight into both her relationship to other areas and her relationship with her own neighborhood.

Additionally, there are a few things in the manuscript that felt so unique to Portland that they might alienate readers from other places. For example, no one outside of the Portland metropolitan area are going to know what PGE is. Additionally, references to specific places (like Trader Vic's) should be accompanied by a brief description or explanation the first time they are mentioned.

Characters

Eileen

Eileen is *such* a strong character! As I made my way through the novel, I found myself loving and hating her in equal measure, and I think you've done a great job of establishing her as a harsh and largely unlikeable character. It's also a trait which completely aligns with her backstory and what she's going through—and I love everything you've done to turn the “sweet old lady” stereotype on its head! That being said, there are times where her outlook on life and other people is *so* negative that it pulls me (and likely other readers as well) out of the story and makes me want to stop reading. She's not just negative and harsh, but at times she is cruel. And even when she's looking at people in her life that she genuinely loves, she is quick to become negative or judgemental. This makes sense for her character, but

sometimes these moments go on and on, becoming somewhat exhausting, and they could really benefit from being broken up by other elements of the narrative.

Additionally, Eileen's tendency to fixate on and criticize other women's bodies throughout the story really rubbed me the wrong way. I understand that her generation was largely lacking influences of today's body positivity movements, but including these asides *will* be alienating and frustrating for this manuscript's younger audience members. They don't add anything to the story—we already know that Eileen is judgemental. If there is a larger underlying reason for this fixation such as self-esteem issues of her own, these need to be explored and addressed further. Right now, these moments don't add anything to the manuscript, plot, or characterization—they just feel out of touch.

I think the manuscript could also benefit from more insight into why Eileen resents her own daughter so much. When you met with us, I know you discussed the ways in which alcoholism impacts a family and leads to generational resentment, but that thread is not strong enough in the manuscript's current state. As things stand now, it seems largely like Eileen hates her daughter for no reason. Not only does this make it hard to root for Eileen or even to understand her position, but it also makes the sweeter moments that the two share throughout the story less impactful.

Shirley

Besides Eileen, Shirley is the most fleshed out character in the manuscript by far. We get a really great picture of her and Eileen's relationship and how she works to soften some of Eileen's sharper edges. The work that she does behind the scenes to curb Eileen's alcohol use, even before Eileen realizes that's what she's doing, is very well done and paints an excellent picture of who Shirley is as a friend and caretaker. The only time I found myself questioning her and Eileen's relationship was when the two of them were touring retirement homes and Eileen was lying through her teeth about her finances. While I can absolutely understand Eileen being nervous and embarrassed to confess to her friend how much trouble she's in, I think it needs to be established earlier on in this section that Shirley is being kept in the dark. As things stand now, it's a little confusing when it starts to become clear that they have very different budgets in mind but no reason is given.

Shirley is described as being Eileen's neighbor five times in the first forty pages of the manuscript. This repetition is unnecessary and was, honestly, frustrating to read. I would limit this description to just one or two uses.

Mitzi

As I was reading, I often found myself struggling to paint a clear picture of Mitzi. I think her character provides excellent insight into her and Eileen's family structure and dynamic growing up, but I struggled to connect with her without stronger characterization. I also had a hard time with her introduction to the story. I found myself confused by the way in which she was introduced to the story. The way Eileen moved directly from dropping Bert off at rehab to discussing her mom's will with Mitzi felt callous and darkened my interpretation of both women. I also found myself wanting a stronger conclusion to the decision of what to do with their mother's house.

Jennifer

Jennifer's character does such a good job of demonstrating the complicated family structures that can arise as a result of alcohol use disorder. I'll talk more on this later in the letter, but I mostly found myself wanting more from her character and wishing some of her loose threads were connected. We see a lot of flashes of her character—the sweet moments with her mom, her affair, her breakup from her husband, the less sweet moments with her mother—and I would love to see these things delved into just a little bit deeper. I think her character could be leveraged to give even greater insight into Eileen and their mother–daughter relationship.

Sarah

I really enjoyed the way you used Sarah to demonstrate the gentler, more caring side of Eileen! I think she's an excellent addition to the story, and she adds a lot to the manuscript. That being said, I found some discrepancies between her established age and the way in which she behaves. I often found myself forgetting that she's eight years old, as her characterization feels much younger than that. If I were to

guess from the way she's portrayed, I would put her at five or six years old. This could easily be fixed by either making her younger, or aging up her dialogue slightly.

Additionally, I wonder if her brother Tommy is really necessary to the manuscript? Despite being Sarah's brother, he is brought up much less and is confined to off-handed mentions without any real presence. He seems to largely be used to characterize his father, which could be accomplished by adding more details about Alex directly instead.

Bert

Though readers are given a pretty clear picture of Bert through Eileen's memories of him, I would love to see more memories of the way he interacted with his family. I feel like just a few examples of this would give readers a much stronger understanding of how the Bishop family dynamic got to where it is in the present day.

Plot & Structure

Title

Over and over again, I found myself coming back to the manuscript's title, *Bert & Eileen*. When I began reading the story for the first time, entirely without context, I went into it expecting a more romance-focused plot because of the title. Then, after I very quickly realized that the story wasn't headed in that direction, I figured it would follow the lives of Bert and Eileen together. Instead, the majority of *Bert & Eileen* follows Eileen alone. And though a lot of her self reflection revolves around Bert and their relationship, the most fleshed out relationship in the manuscript is between Eileen and Shirley. Would you be open to considering other titles that might reflect the manuscript's content and themes more accurately?

My immediate suggestion, given that the story primarily follows Eileen, would be to rename it just *Eileen*. Unfortunately, Ottessa Moshfegh beat me to the title with her highly successful, award-winning 2015 thriller *Eileen*. Given this, some other suggestions include:

- *On the Train to Pendleton* → When you met with our class, you mentioned that Eileen and her story came to you while you were on a train. With that and the manuscript's current opening scene in mind, I think this title is a great way to honor that and to entice readers with the title alone. Even if you were to restructure the beginning of the manuscript (more on this in the next section), I believe that this title would still work perfectly well.
- *Tough Old Broad* → More than just an homage to Eileen's baseball cap in Chapter 27, this is an apt and humorous description of Eileen herself throughout the story. Using this title would really help set the tone for the manuscript and establish the age ranges of its characters.
- *Of a Certain Age - OR - Women of a Certain Age* → Like my previous suggestion, these titles are a strong indicator of the manuscript's content. It's also a reference to the way Eileen describes herself and other women throughout the story, and is something you said during our meeting as well.

Starting the Novel

As I read through the manuscript for the second time, I found myself wondering what the primary inciting incident of the piece was. The story opens with Eileen taking Bert to rehab, but her movement and character development don't begin until after Bert dies in detox. I recognize that this is a larger shift, but I wonder if the manuscript might be stronger and more compelling if it started later on? I found the first few chapters of *Bert & Eileen* to be some of the slower and less compelling sections of the book, and I worry that some readers might be turned off by the slow ease into the narrative. What if, instead, the manuscript opened with Eileen discovering the voicemails left on her answering machine by the detox center? The stakes are immediately higher, and there's so much opportunity for dramatic tension and compelling mystery. (Why wasn't Eileen home to receive these calls? Why was Bert in a detox facility? And so on.)

Eileen does a lot of reflecting throughout the manuscript on her relationship with Bert and their train ride to the treatment center. Much of the current opening material could be shifted into these scenes to reveal their final days together slowly and perhaps more devastatingly.

Ending the Manuscript

I absolutely *love* that Eileen moves in with Shirley at the end of the manuscript! It is the perfect conclusion to their friendship and sisterly bond. That being said, I wish that this decision had been expanded on more. I would love to see it being discussed and pondered as a possibility before it is suddenly enacted, and I think a more in-depth conversation between Eileen and Shirley would do a lot to further cement the strength of their relationship. Additionally, this is a *huge* decision, and I think it would make sense for Eileen to think about it at least a few times before she decides to move in.

Narration & POV

Inconsistent Point of View

Throughout the manuscript, I noticed three key point of view inconsistencies. First was the occasional slip from third person limited to first person narration. Particularly in dialogue tags, Eileen is referred to as “I” rather than “she” on more than one occasion.

Second, there were several instances where the narration slid from a limited point of view, told from Eileen’s perspective, to a more omniscient viewpoint. Most notably, this happens in the very first sentences of the manuscript. *Bert & Eileen* opens on a landscape view outside the train to Pendleton and readers are told that “Eileen can’t see the train tracks winding ahead.” From the moment she awakens in the next sentence to the end of the manuscript, the narration is shared consistently in Eileen’s third person limited point of view, making the opening description impossible. There are several other smaller slips into a more omniscient viewpoint, when Eileen has insight into other characters’ motivations and feelings that she otherwise shouldn’t have. For example, on **page 29**, the narration reads “Shirley’s hand drops. Even if she said more than she intended, it still has the ring of truth,” despite Eileen having no clear way of knowing whether or not Shirley said more than she intended. I would suggest reframing these and other instances to align with the more limited third person point of view. It makes sense that this story is told through Eileen’s eyes, and it’s stronger for doing so.

Finally, there are several instances where Eileen's inner monologue is too closely tied in with the rest of the narration. This leads to shifts into second person that are lacking indicators of being internal dialogue. There is nothing inherently wrong with these shifts, they just need to be formatted in some way to let readers know that they're getting internal dialogue instead of narration. For shorter, 1-2 sentence instances, italics would suffice. For longer stretches of thought, quotations or some other indicator may be necessary.

"Off-Screen" Moments

Particularly in the latter half of the manuscript, I was struck by how many critical moments happen "off-screen," relegated to the margins and readers' imaginations. It is, of course, impossible (not to mention ill-advised) to include every detail of a character's life on the page, even in slice-of-life stories like this. That being said, there were a few key moments where I found myself either confused and wondering if I'd missed something, or disappointed to realize something had been skipped.

On **page 76**, Eileen asks Shirley "How do you deal with loneliness after living with someone for a long time?" After this, we get a paragraph on how Shirley sips her wine, sits in her chair, and looks toward Eileen, but no answer. Instead, we are told that "Eileen swallows, now sorry she asked the question. Shirley makes it sound bleaker and scarier than she imagined." Cutting Shirley's answer here is a missed opportunity to further develop her character and establish her role in guiding Eileen through the loss of Bert. Character development aside, Eileen's reaction to Shirley's answer left me insatiably curious and frustrated by the lack of context. Especially considering there is other dialogue already present in this scene, the removal of such an important exchange left me unsatisfied and feeling like I had missed out on something pivotal.

On **page 142**, I found myself similarly frustrated. As Eileen reflects on the uncharacteristically amicable evening she and Jennifer had shared, the narration reads: "Last night they laughed as they finished that chocolate bar though Eileen was careful not to offer a second brandy. That would have tempted fate." Given how many of Eileen and Jennifer's interactions are strained or even hostile, the few tender moments like this that they have are critically important for fleshing out and understanding

the intricacies of their relationship. To have a soft moment like this mentioned but not written feels like a great loss.

There are also a small handful of *less* tender moments with Jennifer that I found myself wanting. On **page 150**, Eileen says to Shirley: “True to form, Jennifer came with a bouquet of gladiolas. Repeatedly said she was sorry her father died like that. Then, on the ride home from lunch, ‘Did Dad have a will?’ she asked me.” By this point, Eileen’s animosity toward her daughter as well as her status as an unreliable narrator have already been so clearly established that I found myself entirely unable to decipher if this actually happened, or if Eileen is simply on a mission to paint Jennifer as a villain.

Similarly, on **page 198**, Eileen tells Shirley, “Things were a little frosty at Jennifer’s. I was afraid they weren’t going to let me take Sarah.” Like the previous example, this made me question the legitimacy of Eileen’s characterizations of her daughter. But it also made me feel like I was missing a critical moment of change. Up until this point, it is implied that Jennifer was withholding the grandchildren from Bert and Bert alone. If that withholding is changing to apply to Eileen as well, it’s necessary that we see it and understand why.

While none of these instances require extensive and sprawling edits or additions, the inclusion of these and other “off-screen” moments would do a lot to strengthen the narrative and cement certain characterizations.

Dialogue

In character-driven stories like this, dialogue is such a huge and critical part of the narrative. While I recognize that some differences between written and spoken dialogue are necessary to keep manuscripts flowing smoothly, I think there are a number of ways in which this is taken too far in *Bert & Eileen*. Most notably is the rate at which other characters’ names are spoken. This can be seen in particular during the conversation between Eileen and Sarah in **Chapter 8** and the number of times Sarah refers

to Eileen as “Nana” in such a short conversation. This is also a trend that extends beyond dialogue, with names being used a *lot* in the narration itself.

Additionally, there are instances throughout where the dialogue feels stilted or stiff, just not quite true to life. One small example of this can be seen on **page 140** when Jennifer and Eileen are discussing tea and Earl Grey decaf. While it makes sense for their conversation to feel generally stilted given their difficult relationship, this instance did not feel intentional.

Bert & Eileen is a beautiful, compelling narrative, and I see so much potential in this story. Thank you again for trusting our class with your manuscript. I hope my suggestions prove fruitful as you’re revising, and I look forward to seeing it in its final form someday.

Warmly,

Ash Duggirala