

Ooligan Press Editorial Department

July 2, 2018

Matt Tompkins
Odsburg
Editorial Note

Dear Matt:

Diving into the world of *Odsburg* has been nothing short of delightful, and I'm sure I speak for everyone at Ooligan when I say we are thrilled to work on such a memorable and entertaining manuscript. Your ability to deliver clever social commentary while switching seamlessly between numerous distinct personas is impressive and makes for a compelling (and, at times, haunting) read. I have every confidence that *Odsburg* will find a special home in readers' hearts, and on behalf of the editorial department, I thank you for giving us the opportunity to help this manuscript reach its full potential.

Much like the previous round of editing, this letter includes feedback from several editors, which I have compiled into one cohesive document. This letter addresses more global aspects of the manuscript, such as formatting, interconnectedness, use of language, and areas for expansion. (For more specific, story-by-story feedback, see the annotated manuscript.) Our feedback is broken into three broad categories—Structure, Narrative, and Language—which are in turn organized into subcategories tackling various pieces of the manuscript.

In this note, I use “the narrator” to refer to Matthias Tomkins and “the speaker” to refer to a character telling a story in first person. I also differentiate between the author (you) and the narrator.

Structure

The manuscript employs a relatively consistent structure, alternating longer stories and transcriptions with shorter found artifacts. For the most part, this keeps the pace of the story moving along swiftly—an important consideration, as there isn't an overarching plot to drive things forward. However, this pattern does drop off in the last third of the book. Thankfully, this manuscript has so much room to expand that there should be no trouble finding new artifacts and stories to include. I'll talk more about that below.

Page Numbers

To assist with navigation and readability, please consider adding page numbers to the next draft of the manuscript, as well as to the table of contents. This will make it easier to move through the manuscript and to visualize the length of the various stories and transcriptions.

Italics

Italics show up frequently in *Odsburg*, sometimes to set off direct quotes, sometimes to indicate internal thoughts, and at other times to emphasize individual words or phrases. For the sake of consistency, I suggest limiting use of italics to indicate emphasis and internal thoughts. For example, in the story “Put On a Happy Face,” the dialogue, which is currently italicized, could be set in quotation marks.

Time and Date

The narrator states that he embedded himself in Odsburg for two years, but the stories and ephemera he collects have no indication of the day or time on which he collected them. Grounding these artifacts with specific times or dates would help readers get a feel for the progression of the narrator’s time in Odsburg. (That doesn’t mean the artifacts need to occur in any sort of chronological order, of course.) Adding dates and times would also help clarify the interconnectedness between the pieces—like the relationship between “Actualize” and “Cat Game.”

Author vs. Narrator

Currently, the narrator is a somewhat distinct character, with his own zany history, ethically dubious methods of gathering information, and a separate “About the Author” section at the back of the book. While some lines are drawn between Matthias Tomkins and Matt Tompkins, the barrier is rather permeable. Having two “About the Author” sections, in particular, shatters the illusion that *Odsburg* has worked so hard to establish. Consider going full “Lemony Snicket” and creating a completely separate persona for the narrator, or consider stepping more fully into the role of Matthias Tom(p)kins.

The Ending

The final story, “BFF,” is one of the strongest pieces in the manuscript, and provides a fitting end to the book, exploring the idea of what’s real and what’s imaginary—and whether or not it matters. That being said, consider adding more of a wrap-up. The narrator obviously isn’t afraid to share his thoughts on everything he sees and experiences, so it could be interesting to get his final perspective on his time in Odsburg. This doesn’t have to take the form of a “that’s all, folks” retrospective, but could instead be a piece where the narrator is simply more present.

Areas to Expand

Odsburg is a relatively short manuscript, yet there’s an entire city’s worth of material for you to pull from. Consider adding more short found artifacts to break up the last third of the

manuscript, which is heavy on longer pieces. Things like excerpts from blog posts, police reports, newspaper clippings, shopping lists, internal memos from OdsWellMore, notes from a town hall... The options are almost literally endless. Here are a few more specific areas we'd love to see more of:

- Children's perspectives: The found artifacts from the schools as well as the transcribed recordings are some of the strongest and most interesting pieces in the book. Consider adding more of these. "Out of the mouth of babes," as they say.
- Odsburg College: Who founded it and what is the curriculum like? I almost envision it as being somewhat in cahoots with OdsWellMore. What are the students protesting or upset about? How do out-of-town students react to the weird goings-on? An excerpt from the student newspaper would be fascinating here.
- Advertisements: How do local companies market their products in a town like Odsburg? What kind of hyper-specific problems do Odsburgers deal with? There are lots of opportunities for humor here.
- The therapist/psychiatrist: One or two characters mention going to therapy or seeing a psychiatrist—imagine the stories that person must have!
- Alva Moonstone: She clearly had an influence on the town, and still seems to have a decent number of devotees (whether town officials want to acknowledge it or not). Give us more information about her—maybe an artifact from her time.

Narrative

Although there is no greater plot per se, *Odsburg's* narrative arc meanders through the town itself, allowing readers to get a sense of Odsburg and the people who live there. Each piece, both stories and artifacts, provides some sort of commentary, often in the form of a quiet observation or revelation. *Odsburg* is about the town, certainly, but more than that—it's about the trials and tribulations of modern life. This manuscript is poignant and powerful, but there are a few small tweaks that could elevate it further.

Narrator's Past Work

In the first "About the Author," you mention that *Odsburg* is Matthias's first "successfully published" book, but it's clear that he's been working as a literary-ethno-anthro-lore-ologist for a decent chunk of time. Consider adding examples of some of the past work he's done or past "civilizations" he's studied or been embedded with. Where does Odsburg rank on the weirdness scale of cultures he's experienced?

Diverse Relationships

In the last round of edits, the Acquisitions team suggested adding more female perspectives, and you've done a wonderful job of that. On this read-through, I noticed that almost all of the romantic relationships that are featured or mentioned are heterosexual. Of course, the romantic relationships are very rarely the focus of the individual pieces—it's just something that I noticed. Considering the current social and political climate, I'm sure readers will notice as well. In a town the size of Odsburg, in this day and age, it makes sense that there would be a variety of relationships on the LGBTQ+ spectrum. Perhaps, for example, Carlie Hewlet's boyfriend Sam could instead be her girlfriend Sam.

The Town Itself

In my reading, I picture Odsburg as a town of about 15,000 people, or perhaps a little smaller. The town is small enough that everyone basically goes to the same places, and it seems likely that gossip would travel fast and everyone would know everyone else's business. However, very few of the stories give a feel for the town as a whole. It's obvious that strange things do happen in Odsburg, but there isn't much else in the way of "local flavor" established. Almost every small town has some hyperspecific local culture or other weird claims to fame. (A few examples from my hometown of 27,000 in western Kansas: childhood devotion to slushies from a very specific gas station in the middle of town; yearly field trips to the natural history museum to look at dinosaur fossils; a local benevolent ghost who haunts the hills outside of town; green bean and dumpling soup.) The seeds are here, with OdsWellMore presiding over everything, but I almost want to see more of how the town itself affects everyday life. Like the two characters whose fathers went missing—is that just something that happens in Odsburg? I suppose what I'm saying is, I want to see how these individual experiences tie into the larger fabric of the town.

Locals vs. Officials

The narrator goes into this environment assuming that no one will want to talk to him; he hides his tape recorder and resorts to somewhat dubious methods to gather his artifacts. However, most of the people he ends up speaking to seem quite eager to tell him their experience. It might be interesting to explore the discrepancy here. Perhaps the locals and laypeople are more than willing to talk about the strange things that happen in Odsburg, but the city officials and OdsWellMore employees, less so?

Language

The writing in *Odsburg* is strong and showcases your ability to switch between voices. Most of the different speakers are distinguishable, and it's easy to get a feel for them based on how they talk. However, there are a few areas where the language distracts from the story.

“Actualyze”

The content of this vignette is hilarious, and provides a fascinating foil to the other Actualyze story (“Cat Game”). (I have a few theories as to how these two are connected, but I'm not sure which one is right... Which is part of the fun.) The broken language makes it difficult to read, though—it's slightly off-putting, and might lead readers to skip it entirely. I'm also not exactly clear on what the language is meant to convey. At best, I picture some connection to Reginald: perhaps Reginald was the homeless man from this story and the Actualyze system enabled him to get on his feet, or perhaps Actualyze ruined him and this story takes place after “Cat Game” (the more likely of the two). Perhaps the man overheard Reginald talking about Actualyze and was so inspired he wrote it down on a refrigerator box—or vice versa! The main thing that concerns me about this piece is that it appears to rely on tired stereotypes of homeless people, specifically the idea that they are uneducated, which is how I interpret the rampant misspellings. Depending on what exactly you want this piece to achieve, I recommend revising it. Perhaps it would work equally well as a brochure? At the very least, I suggest reducing the number of misspelled words to make it easier for the reader.

“In Memoriam”

Similar to the above, this piece is very hard to read. Speaking frankly, I had to psyche myself up for it, because I knew it would be a lot of work to get through. Keep in mind what you're asking the reader to do—a lot of them would probably decide that this piece isn't worth the trouble. Also consider if the piece is being served best by this approach. I understand the intention in the choice to write it this way, but I believe the same effect could be achieved in a much less dramatic way. By reducing the amount of dialect in the story, you'll make it more approachable. You can still preserve the jarring switch that happens halfway through, when the speaker quotes the girls he overheard (which, by the way, is masterful).

Descriptions of Odsburg

Throughout the manuscript, you do a great job of setting the scene and really giving readers a feel for the various speakers and settings. That said, it'd be great if you could take it just a little bit further. What are the various locations—particularly the ones that get a lot of air time, such as Stardust and Anderson's Tavern—really like? What makes them distinct or memorable? Fleshing out the narrator's introductions before each piece with more sensory details would help readers get lost in Odsburg.

Recommended Reading

Frequently, while reading *Odsburg*, I found myself reminded of bits and pieces of other media. I've compiled a list of books, stories, and TV shows here that I think might help inspire you during the revision process. If you are able to engage with any of these works, I hope you enjoy them.

- *Humans of New York*: A website/coffee table book containing portraits and interviews with New Yorkers from all walks of life. The creator, Brandon, does an excellent job of transcribing condensed yet deeply personal interviews. They're all great examples of how people open themselves up to interviewers, and how they talk about themselves when given the chance.
- *Dark*: A show on Netflix, originally in German but available with English subtitles or with an English dub. (I recommend the subtitles.) *Dark* is gloomy and atmospheric and deals with the inhabitants of a small, isolated town as they try to piece together why bizarre things are happening.
- "Orientation" by Daniel Orozco: A bleakly comedic story told in second person. I think it's similar in spirit to *Odsburg's* "About the Neighbors."
- *Parks and Recreation*: Another television show, also available on Netflix. You're probably familiar with this one, and if you aren't, I don't expect you to sit down and watch all seven seasons, but *Parks and Rec* does a great job of establishing the character of a specific small town.
- *Winesburg, Ohio* by Sherwood Anderson: In truth, I haven't read this, but from what I've heard, it seems similar to *Odsburg* in scope—albeit a little less speculative.
- *Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle* series by Betty MacDonald: I thought of these books while reading "Put On a Happy Face." The *Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle* books are all about how to deal with misbehaving children in ways both conventional and magical.

Revision Process

When reviewing the corresponding manuscript document ("Odsburg Full MS - Line Edit.docx") you'll want to make sure you have "All Markup" on. This will allow you to view the comments made by the editorial team in the margins. Depending on what version of Microsoft Word you are using (assuming you are using Word), the way you access "All Markup" may change.

Typically it is accessed by locating the “Review” tab at the top, finding the tracking group, and clicking “Show Markup” or “All Markup.”

I know your editorial note from the Acquisitions department included a step-by-step revision process, and most of those suggestions apply here as well. To save you the trouble of digging up that document, though, here’s what I recommend:

1. Go through the edited manuscript that was returned to you with this note and address the line-level suggestions first. Most of the comments have to do with specific stories, and there aren’t that many of them.
2. Next, focus on the structural changes. Address the use of italics, add page numbers, and consider giving each story or artifact a time, date, or other temporal signifier. Decide how you’d like to proceed with the narrator character and make relevant changes to the introduction and About the Author.
3. Address the areas to expand. What other stories do you want to tell? How else can you reveal Odsburg’s character? Be mindful of the ratio of longform stories to shorter found artifacts. In particular, the final third of the manuscript could use more short pieces to break up the longer ones.
4. Take care of the Language issues. Two of the stories may require extensive rewrites in order to best serve the narrative. Add in descriptions of local landmarks.
5. Tackle the remaining Narrative questions. Focus on bringing out the fabric of the town. (Some of these will likely be addressed during the structural revisions.)
6. Step away from the manuscript. Let it sit for a few days before coming back and taking a final pass. Make any last adjustments before sending it back to us for the next round of editing.

Thank you again for the opportunity for giving us the opportunity to work on *Odsburg*. I very much look forward to receiving the next iteration of the manuscript from you. If you need anything at all while working through the revision process, please don’t hesitate to get in touch with me or Marina. We absolutely adore this book and are always available to help.

Sincerely,

Madison Schultz
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Ooligan Press

Marina Garcia
Project Manager
Ooligan Press

