Answers Melanie (Melanie reads JAFF)

1. When you sit down to review a book, what do you think a review is actually for? Is it primarily for other readers, for the author, or for yourself?
   I write the review for me and the reader. For me because I want to remember the contents of the books and find it later when I remember a particular scene. For the readers because I want to recommend a book I like to others and want them to find a book they like.
2. What separates a genuinely helpful review from simply saying, “I loved it” or “I hated it”?
   A helpful review has more information about various aspects of the story. It tells me what the reviewer likes and what was problematic about the story. It helps me determine if the story may be to my liking.
3. What are the essential pieces you think a good Amazon or Goodreads review should contain?
   A good review contains the honest opinion of the reviewer. It tells what the reviewer liked and didn’t like and it hopefully gives me for example a warning when there is no HEA
4. What kinds of details help another reader decide whether a book is right for them?
   I think it is helpful to mention that a book has mature content so that people who are not comfortable with a certain heat level can avoid the book. I think it’s also helpful to know if a book is of a certain trope (for example Not a Bennet) so that I can explicitly search for it or avoid it.
5. How much plot summary is useful before a review starts becoming a recap? How do you discuss things like characterization, pacing, prose, dialogue, worldbuilding, romance, or plot without making a review feel like a school book report?
   I always start with a plot summary because it helps me come into my review. But the summary should be short and not the whole review because otherwise it is only a retaliation of the premise.
   I’m not sure if my reviews are a bit like a book report at school ;-) . But I’m ok with that, I have my writing style and I like it ;-) . I try to tell what I like and what I don't like without spoiling or telling too much detail. And I do not write about every aspect of the book.
6. Should reviewers explain why something worked or didn’t work for them? What does that look like in practice?
   I do it because it is sometimes the reason why I liked or didn’t like a book. But I do not go too much into detail or spoil the story. I think a detailed report on why something, in my opinion, didn’t work is best sent to the author.
7. How important is it to distinguish between “this book is poorly written” and “this book simply wasn’t for me”?
   I think it is very important, because the book that wasn’t for me is not as a result a bad book. Others may love it. A poorly written book has substantial problems like an inconsistent timing or plot or problems with the writing.
8. What does a really effective three-star review look like? Can a mixed review actually be more useful than a glowing one?
   I do not often give three stars because I normally like what I’m reading. But I think a three star review with constructive criticism about the weaknesses and strengths of the books is a better review then a good one that simply says the book was good.

With a constructive three star review others can better decide and the author can improve the book.

9. Do star ratings mean the same thing to everyone? What does a five-star, four-star, or three-star rating mean to each of you?
   No, rating is not the same for every person. For me: Five stars → I loved it, four stars → I liked it, but …, three stars → I would maybe recommend it to another person.
10. How should reviewers handle spoilers? Are spoiler warnings enough, or are there some things you simply shouldn't reveal?
    I try to not spoil a story because I for myself do not like to read reviews with spoilers.
11. What are some common mistakes you see people make in Amazon or Goodreads reviews?
    They only say "I love it" or "I do not like it" More detail, please ;-)
12. What makes a review unfair rather than merely negative? Are there criticisms that don't really belong in a book review—for example, complaints about shipping, price, cover damage, narration, or expectations created by marketing?
    A review is unfair if it personally attacks the author.
    None of the things mentioned above belong in a review. A review is about the book and its effect on me as a reader.
13. How do you write a negative review without making it personal or cruel? Is there a difference between criticizing an author's choices and criticizing the author?
    I try to give evidence why I didn't like particular parts or why they were problematic. I think that makes the review more neutral and less personal. With this I'm also criticizing the book and not the author personally. There is certainly a difference between the two. In my opinion it's ok to criticize a book in a respectful way but it's not ok to criticize the author.
14. Should reviewers ever mention grammar, editing, formatting, or typos? If so, when does that become useful information rather than nitpicking?
    I think it is important to mention it when this influences my liking of the story. As for grammar and typos, I think I will not recognize them because I'm no native speaker ;-)
15. How much should genre expectations influence a review? Is it fair to criticize a book for following conventions that are normal within its genre?
    In my opinion it's not fair. Both are ok and it's the author's choice.
16. Things become more complicated when the reviewer is also an author, editor, blogger, beta reader, or other industry professional. When should those relationships be disclosed?
    As I'm only a reader I can not answer this question.
17. What if you know the author socially but have never worked with them? Does that need to be disclosed?
    No, the JAFF community is rather small, therefore one has interacted with nearly every author before.
18. Is it ethical for authors to publicly review books by direct competitors in their own genre? Does the answer change if the review is positive versus negative? What about editors reviewing books they did not edit but which were written by authors they could potentially work with someday?
    I see no problem with it, especially if the review is positive. A negative review may be received as bashing another author and may therefore not be favourable for the reviewing author.

19. How do you recognize when your professional knowledge is making you evaluate a book differently from an ordinary reader?
    I see myself as an ordinary reader ;-)
20. Are there situations where the most ethical choice is simply not to review a book? If you're part of a relatively small genre community where everyone knows everyone else, is complete impartiality even possible? What does ethical reviewing look like in that environment?
    I think complete impartiality is never possible, especially in a small community like JAFF. But one can try to be neutral and when that is not possible it is certainly better to not write a review to not hurt anyone's feelings.
21. Do you write differently for Amazon than you do for Goodreads, a blog, or another review platform?
    No. I have a long review on Amazon, Goodreads, my blog on Substack and on Facebook and I post a short version of this review in different Facebook groups.
22. Is there anything reviewers should understand about how reviews affect authors before they post one—or should that not influence the review at all?
    If one is not mean or cruel it should not influence the review.
23. Authors are often told never to respond to reviews. Do you agree? Are there exceptions?
    I love it when they react to my review ;-) . I think every author should do as they see fit as long as they are as respectful of the reviewer as the reviewer is of them. I do not see a problem.
24. What responsibilities do reviewers have when discussing sensitive subjects, representation, historical issues, or potentially triggering material?
    I think it is good to give a trigger warning that people can avoid the book when there are aspects they do not like about it. If there are issues with the book I would mention them shortly but I think it is better to tell these issues to the author so that they have a chance to fix them.
25. Can a negative review actually help sell a book to the right reader?
    Yes! If there is a review complaining about too much steam in a book I'm certain to read it ;-)
26. If someone in the audience has never written a book review before, what is the simplest formula you would give them?
    Be honest and not cruel. Tell what you liked and what you didn't like. Simply start.