WRITER'S COMPASS

A Writer's Guide to Fiction

ELIZABETH LYON

A Perigee Book

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To my writing community—
students, friends, and colleagues

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INTRODUCTION

BEYOND THE POWER of the pen, fiction writers wield the power of imagination, which has stirred the greatest passions and accomplishments that humanity has ever known. We tell stories. That's all, you say. Yet, telling stories is at the core of being human. The past exists only in how we talk about it—to ourselves and others. The present exists in our moment-to-moment description of what is real, while the future is merely a set of stories we affirm, anticipate, or resist.

Even so, few people would argue that a difference does exist between fiction and nonfiction, between the imaginative creation and our corporeal reality. In the hands of a master storyteller, the line between the two is, perhaps, inconsequential. Story can be every bit as powerful and life-altering as true life. The elixir of writing fiction for many of us is the undiluted freedom to project onto paper imagined people and events with the force of emotion we usually reserve for real life. The elixir, carried by a writer's emotion, transfers to readers, placing them under a spell and carrying them away into a virtual world. Here, without risking death, danger, or transmutation, a reader can vicariously experience life's worst and best, and what is physically impossible.

As readers, we are unfettered from the constraints of time, space, or obligation, happily led into the realm of fiction. We turn a measure of control—and certainly trust—over to the writer. To the writer, this means there is an implied responsibility not just to offer

entertainment and art, but to recognize the profound effect our works have on others. Of the many promises we make to our readers, we also promise to safekeep their spirits, the ineffable combination of their hearts and souls offered so willingly to us for our alchemy. Should our readers' hearts and souls be returned in the exact state in which they were lent? If we have not moved our readers to become something different, if not greater, by their time spent reading our stories, then we have wasted both their time and ours.

What stories have changed you? As a child, stories helped forge the self I was becoming. I incorporated into my being Charles's epiphany about love from Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*. I opened to animal intelligence and communication through Andre Norton's many novels. Jo March's independent tenacity and passion called forth my own after I read Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. So many stories from childhood to the present day live on in my mind and body that I am certain they are part of my blood, bones, and DNA.

The trick as a writer is to know how to create story magic. That is what you'll find addressed in this book. I will have accomplished my goal if your writing transcends you as its creator, if your stories and characters endure, perhaps forever, with your readers.

As in other books in the Writer's Compass series, this guide features the four cardinal directions. In North, you'll find your bearings for any piece of fiction you conceive. North contains instruction on nearly every aspect of craft, from story conception to completion. It addresses the need for a clear map, whether you intend to write a short-short story or an epic novel. As a section, South offers troubleshooting and problem solving that will come in handy when revising and can serve as a quick review. You'll find guidance for marketing in East and for integrating your writing with your personal journey in West. My prior book, *The Sell Your Novel Tool Kit*, provides yet more orientation to marketing novels. The forthcoming Writer's Compass book on editing and revision leads readers beyond the problem-solving offered in South into the breadth and depth of revision.

Now sharing an editing firm, I have spent the last fifteen years working with novelists in critique groups and as an independent book editor. I have witnessed the struggles and understand the booby traps and bogs that beset the unaware—or tired—writer. In the long process of development from novice to professional, writers often get lost, or at least discouraged, and they occasionally simply give up. Nearly every fiction writer experiences or entertains these "threshold guardians," as these challenges to success are called in the hero's journey.

With a good map and a compass, you can find your way out of these jungles of despair, past the guardians and gargoyles, and move forward to the safe haven of your dreams. It is my earnest intent to provide you with the means, in skill and attitude, to reach them.

my boat goes west, yours east
heavens a wind for both journeys

Chao Li-Hua

Godspeed, fellow traveler.

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Spring equinox 2003
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and
www.4-edit.com

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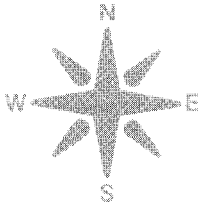

NORTH

Getting Your Bearings

ONE

The Lay of the Land

I believe that stories have this power—they enter us, transport us, they change things inside us, so invisibly, so minutely, that sometimes, we're not even aware that we come out of a great book as a different person from the person we were when we began reading it.

Julia Alvarez

THE MOMENT YOU lay down your first words of fiction, you become a magician like David Copperfield. Through the alchemy of craft and story, you create an illusion where the reader suspends disbelief, just as Copperfield makes his audiences believe he's made a Boeing 747 airplane disappear.

Modern neuroscientists have discovered what ancient shamans have known all along: Stories have power. Power to heal, to destroy, and to change history. In fact, fiction may have a longer-lasting effect than magic. Thought releases brain chemicals and neural electricity. Stories can "get under the skin" and integrate into the interior landscape of the self—and perhaps of the soul.

We writers receive no greater compliment than to have our readers lament the ending of a story. Imagine how you would feel knowing that your characters—their lives, dilemmas, and triumphs—live on in the memory of your readers side by side with memories of actual people and situations.

Stories move people to think and act. Anaïs Nin said, "What we are familiar with we cease to see. The write shakes up the familiar scene, and as if by magic, we see a new meaning in it." Art, in the form of a story well told, may literally transform the reader and the culture from the inside out. "A book ought to be an ice pick to break up the frozen sea within us," said Franz Kafka. Stories hold the power to transform the very society they are said to reflect, making storytelling among the highest of callings.

The Language of Fiction

Some writers may consider the distinctions between situation and story, plot and story, and promise and theme as splitting hairs. However, understanding the language of craft and how it operates in the creation of fiction is as important as a musician learning to read notes and play scales. Incident, situation, plot, story, protagonist, antagonist, promise, and theme all establish the foundation upon which you can build *any* story you might want to write. Before we go any further, let's define some of these important ideas.

STORY AND PLOT

The child tucked into bed asks her mother, "Will you tell me a story?" The mother reads "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" or "Hansel and Gretel," or perhaps the mother makes up a character and story, as many parents do. We all grow up with a sense of story, but what, in a technical sense, does *story* mean to a writer?

In this book, *story* means the deepest meaning of a tale, while *plot* refers to the characters and the events that fulfill the story in a specific way. Story is deep; plot is mechanical, even if it is complex. Story is universal; plot is particular. Snow White and her friends, the dwarves, interact in a plot that demonstrates a story about trust. Hansel and Gretel experience a number of incidents that demonstrate a story about adversity and survival.

Story is deep; plot is mechanical.
Story is universal; plot is particular.

Many beginning fiction writers create characters who act and are acted upon, but in the end, they have no story. They have a set of incidents that make up a plot. This is no surprise when you think about it. It's one thing to watch a magic trick that looks so easy; it's another to carry it off yourself.

For instance, my friend Betty and I take Riley, my Border collie, on a walk. She and I discuss going to a movie on Wednesday night. I glance down the path and recognize an old boyfriend. As we greet each other, Riley chases a squirrel. After awhile, Betty and I finish our walk and return home.

Is this a story? No. Is it a plot? No. What I have shared is a *situation* and some *incidents*. Daily life is filled with as many incidents as you care to identify: getting dressed, going to work, talking with friends. All kinds of situations arise from the incidents of our lives. They range from the walk with my friend and dog to someone cutting you off in traffic to an unexpected check—or bill—arriving in the mail.

A situation can become a plot once you have someone with a problem or conflict who seeks an outcome to resolve it. Let's revisit my situation with the many incidents.

I go for a walk with Betty because I am lonely. I ask her if she wants to see a movie on Wednesday night, but she's busy. We encounter my old boyfriend John and stop to talk. Betty knows I was crushed when he stopped seeing me because I wasn't "the one." He is obviously taken by Betty, and by the end of the conversation, he asks for her phone number. While I'm busy chasing Riley, who has run after a squirrel, John asks Betty to go to a movie on Wednesday night. Betty looks my way, then turns to him and says, "Sure."

What I've described here is a plot. You have a character with a problem. She's lonely and seeks her friend's company. She pursues a solution—sharing a movie. You have opposition to her attempt to resolve her problem—her friend can't go. You have a further complication when the old flame makes her loneliness deeper by show-

Characterization, not plot, is the source of a writer's greatest magic.

ing interest in her woman friend. You have deeper emotional conflict yet when Betty reverses her availability and accepts his invitation.

Is it a story? When I added the deeper emotional context of loneliness and the yearning for human companionship, along with the acceptance and caring that friendship implies, it became a story. Are you wondering what happens next? If so, I've begun making magic. You have, at least partly, suspended disbelief in the fictitious world and through curiosity, have shown your willingness to pretend my story is real. Why have you done this? I would bet that you, too, have experienced times of loneliness, the need for human companionship, and the comfort of belonging through friendship. These are universal human needs. You can relate vicariously because my story is your story.

Will you be transformed? Will you carry away some nugget of realization or learning that will transcend this particular story? Currently, I've left you midstream, in the middle of the conflict. The end of the story would determine what the main character learned. Told artfully, a story can move you and alter your brain chemistry. You might make different choices in your life as a result. By my story, not by my plot, you might be transformed.

CHARACTER

Most stories have two levels: the external plot events and the internal character need. Both levels culminate in the character—and reader—learning something fundamental about self and life. Inner and outer; outer a reflection of inner. The oft-repeated reference to a *character-driven plot* refers to the inner story about character that always underlies and propels the outer plot events. Characterization, not plot, is the core of successful fiction. Characterization, not plot, is the source of a writer's greatest magic.

Not all characters are of equal importance or equally developed.

Yet all characters you choose to include in a short story or novel should be necessary and not extraneous. Take J.R.R. Tolkien's masterpiece trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*. Frodo may be the protagonist, but Gandalf, Gollum, Sauron, and the rest of the giant cast are completely necessary. Or take a story with a more limited cast such as Stephen King's *The Green Mile*. The protagonist, Paul Edgecomb, is defined in his role as a head prison guard by the new prisoner, John Coffey, a seven foot, 350-pound soft-spoken man who is scared of the dark and who has the God-given gift to feel the soul of a person.

Just as an adventurer studies maps before beginning a trek, the fiction writer must learn to recognize the landmarks that define the terrain of story. The star of your story is called the *protagonist* and is often the most fully developed of all of the characters in a story. Notice the prefix, "pro," which refers to the necessity of your star being *for* something. This something is the story goal that when reached defines the end of a story. A mystery detective searches for a murderer and seeks to bring him to justice. A young woman seeks a worthy man to fall in love with and marry. A spy infiltrates the enemy and discovers key information to block the detonation of a nuclear device.

The *antagonist* (ant: meaning "against") is the character equal in force to the protagonist but who blocks his or her efforts to reach the story goal. A murderer eludes the detective and tries to kill him. A worthy man misunderstands a young woman's actions and thinks she doesn't want him. An enemy figures out who the spy is and tries to kill him before he finds and divulges their secrets. Antagonists typically have less development than protagonists and possibly less than other characters. They may or may not have a point of view.

Point of view refers to the development of a character within a scene, usually offering that character's thoughts, feelings, physical sensations, actions, and reactions. The many possible points of view are covered in chapter six.

Major characters, who may or may not also be *point-of-view characters*, are allies to the protagonist or antagonist. They may be fully

developed, although they will not have as much development as the protagonist.

Minor characters are not typically granted a point of view—unless this serves a story purpose. They may appear once or many times in a story, often in functional or job roles, but their scant development—in most stories—parallels their importance in the story. The butler may have "done it," but in most stories, he is only a butler. However, minor characters may have viewpoints in certain kinds of stories, such as thrillers, where viewpoints are often unlimited.

STORY STRUCTURE

These terms are the landmarks of characterization. Others define structure. A series of incidents strung together is called *episodic structure*. Episodes or situations are not the same as stories with plots. A story with a plot, *dramatic structure*, features a protagonist who identifies a problem and pursues a goal that would resolve the problem. Conventional short stories and novels alike usually display basic dramatic structure. Life, which constantly presents situations and incidents, i.e. episodic structure, also dishes out multiple problems. Fiction, structured dramatically, unlike life, targets one primary problem.

In general, this primary problem springs from an *inciting incident*. In other words, an inciting incident isn't any ole distressing event; it is the one that lands the "big kahuna" problem in the lap of the protagonist. This primary problem must be resolved at the end of the story, at the *climax*.

A story with a plot, *dramatic structure*, features a protagonist who identifies a problem and pursues a goal that would resolve the problem.

For instance, in *The Goose and the Golden Egg*, the farmer (protagonist) is desperately poor (story problem). A stranger arrives at his farm and gives him a goose that lays golden eggs (inciting incident). He cashes in on the golden eggs, day after day, and becomes rich (false hope). Then he gets

the bright idea to speed up the one-egg-at-a-time process by ripping open the belly of the goose to get lots of eggs (the climax). Not only does he not find any cached eggs, he has killed the golden goose that made him rich, and in no time at all, he is once again poor.

In Wally Lamb's *This Much I Know Is True*, Dominick's schizophrenic twin brother severs his hand (inciting incident), although he does not die. For the rest of the book, Dominick (protagonist) must learn to deal with the emotional loss of his brother and his feeling of failed responsibility to protect him (problem). The climax and resolution of this novel of many layers does not come until Dominick learns who their father was and deals with fatherhood on many levels.

The story problem defines the protagonist's story goal. Everything that happens in the plot, from the inciting incident to the climax, defines *the story arc*. The "everything" in-between is chock-full of problems, crises, and important but lesser goals than the singular "story goal."

While your readers may be entertained by all of the external trappings (i.e., the plot) of your short story or novel, they can be emotionally and alchemically transformed only if you develop the inner story that is at the heart of any writing and that is the source of your writer magic. Nothing motivates a protagonist as strongly as an unquenchable need rooted in suffering that originates in the past. The inner story is the protagonist's psychological or spiritual struggle to fulfill the need.

All human beings yearn for fulfillment of basic needs that go beyond physical survival. The resource box below provides examples of universal needs in some of our best-known novels.

Bill Johnson, author of *A Story is a Promise*, describes a *story promise* as a protagonist's fulfillment of an unmet issue of human need. In other words, by the end of *A Wrinkle in Time*, Charles must fulfill his need to love. By the end of the Lord of the Rings trilogy, Frodo must find the courage to challenge an adversary far

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beyond his strength. I call this need the "story yearning." It is the parallel of the inner character story to the outer plot goal.

Every work of fiction has many implied promises to the reader—consistency in genre, style, and tone; the logical progression of events; and unity of theme. The biggest promise, however, is to share the story journey, with clarity of yearning and goals, with your reader.

Not only can stories entertain, they can heal and enlighten. The ancient shamans knew this in a way that modern storytellers have forgotten. While life is murky, a well-told story offers a clear meaning that can transform readers in ways that transcend entertainment. To the extent that your reader shares the story yearning of the protagonist, may even have suffered a similar trauma in the past, the reader can share the protagonist's fulfillment and resolution.

UNIVERSAL NEEDS STORY PROMISES IN LITERATURE

belonging: Harry Potter series, by J. K. Rowling

family unity: *A Thousand Acres*, by Jane Smiley

family history: *Song of Solomon*, by Toni Morrison

love: *A Wrinkle in Time*, by Madeleine L'Engle

emotional healing: *The Prince of Tides*, by Pat Conroy

redemption: *A Map of the World*, by Jane Hamilton

justice: *To Kill a Mockingbird*, by Harper Lee

freedom: *The Hunt for Red October*, by Tom Clancy

loyalty: *A Perfect Spy*, by John le Carré

survival of kin and clan: *The Grapes of Wrath*, by John Steinbeck

faith: *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret*, by Judy Blume

racial equality: *Invisible Man*, by Ralph Ellison

friendship: *Bridge to Terabithia*, by Katherine Paterson

The meaningful message at the core of an entertaining or enlightening story is a story's *theme*, and every well-written piece of fiction has one—just one. In this sense, fiction stops short of life, which has multiple, and often contradictory, messages. For a story to be clear, effective, and meaningful, whether a short story or an epic, it must illuminate one thematic message. *Theme* is the intellectual counterpart of the story yearning with its roots in universal needs.

For instance, *Charlotte's Web*, by E. B. White, has a story promise about friendship, something all of us need. However, a thematic statement might read: "*Charlotte's Web* describes how devotion and sacrifice on behalf of a friend can bring unforeseen rewards of spirit." A thematic statement for *A Perfect Spy*, by John le Carré, could read: "The only thing that can be counted on is loyalty between men." As a reader, you need not agree with a theme. If the writer has created an authentic protagonist, you can, at a minimum, experience enlargement of your understanding of life and the reality of others in it.

Where to Begin

If you are new to writing fiction, you may wonder if there is a right way to "find" a story, to know how best to plan a story. The answer may not be a comfort to everyone: There is no right way; there is only your way. Anything can and has inspired writers and given them the kernel from which they've developed a story. No matter where you begin, you will have to fill in all the blanks. In other words, if you begin with plot, you still have to create characters, a story arc, and story promise. And so on. Map 1-1 offers sources of story ideas. There are so many helpful books on finding and developing story ideas; Map 1-2 offers a large sampling.

The next chapter introduces the first of several chapters on characterization. If you are among those writers who conjure plots before creating characters, first read chapters three

There is no right way; there is only your way.

and four on story structure. Even though almost all fiction is ultimately character-driven, there is room for the writer who is a "plot monster," like Michael Crichton, whose characters in his novels such as *Jurassic Park* or *Airframe* play an important but secondary role to plot.

For any writer who seeks to learn the fundamentals of craft, characterization done well creates some of the most powerful magic a storyteller can hope to create. If you would like to focus on developing your characters, somewhat separate from plot, first read chapters two, four, six, and seven, which are meant to help you develop characterization in progressively deeper ways.

Know that with knowledge and skill, you create magic, and with magic, you hold the capacity to make a difference in the lives of your readers, a heady responsibility with an unforeseen reward: You, not just your reader, will also be transformed.

Sources of Story Ideas

Source	Example
a phrase or verse	*all the queen's men* *as the night follows day* *Jack be quick*
an evocative word or phrase	*sanguine* *quotidian* *into the night*
an image	*a homeless man* *Van Gogh's* Starry Night *a shoe in the middle of the road*
advice column	*ex-husband proposes to ex-wife* *Korean-American is victim of slurs* *teenage girl struggles with chastity*
TV or newspaper report	*reunion of two Holocaust survivors* *foster child drowns in swollen river* *hackers crash CIA computers*
personal experience	*detained at Checkpoint Charlie* *only white at a black college in 1968* *reunion with first-grade boyfriend*
historical event or period	*first moon landing* *fall of Berlin Wall* *lifetime of Pancho Villa*
conversation with a friend	*what if at 2 P.M., everyone is nude* *Christ returns as a Muslim* *a woman is elected president*

Continued

Source	Example
a strong feeling or belief	*there are no accidents* *greed threatens America's stability* *Homo sapiens is an unstable hybrid*

Generating Ideas—Recommended Books

Ayan, Jordan. *Aha! 10 Ways to Free Your Creative Spirit and Find Your Great Ideas*

Bender, Sheila & Christi Killien. *Writing in a New Convertible with the Top Down: A Unique Guide for Writers*

Bradbury, Ray. *Zen in the Art of Writing: Essays on Creativity*

Bryant, Roberta Jean. *Anybody Can Write: Ideas for the Aspiring Writer, the Beginner, the Blocked Writer*

Cameron, Julia. *The Artist's Way* and *The Right to Write: An Invitation and Initiation into the Writing Life*

Carroll, David L. *A Manual of Writer's Tricks: Essential Advice for Fiction and Nonfiction Writers*

Cook, Marshall. *Freeing Your Creativity: A Writer's Guide*

Downey, Bill. *Right Brain Write On! Overcoming Writer's Block and Achieving Your Creative Potential*

Edelstein, Scott. *The No-Experience-Necessary Writer's Choice*

Elbow, Peter. *Writing Without Teachers*

Gelb, Michael J. *How to Think Like Leonardo da Vinci: Seven Steps to Genius Every Day*

Goldberg, Natalie. *Writing Down the Bones* and *Wild Mind: Living the Writer's Life*

Continued

Golub, Marcia. *I'd Rather Be Writing: A Guide to Finding More Time, Getting More Organized, Completing More Projects, and Having More Fun*

Henry, Laurie. *The Novelist's Notebook*

Lamott, Anne. *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*

Le Guin, Ursula K. *Steering the Craft: Exercises and Discussions on Story Writing for the Lone Navigator or the Mutinous Crew*

Perry, Susan K. *Writing in Flow: Keys to Enhanced Creativity*

Peterson, Lois J. *101 Writing Exercises: To Get You Started & Keep You Going*

Reeves, Judy. *A Writer's Book of Days: A Spirited Companion & Lively Muse for the Writing Life*

Smith, James V., Jr. *Fiction Writer's Brainstormer*

Wood, Monica. *The Pocket Muse: Ideas & Inspiration for Writing*

TWO

Finding the Characters for Your Story

I want to be able to write so powerfully, I can break the heart of the world and heal it . . . remake it.

Dorothy Allison, Skin: Talking About Sex, Class, and Literature

CHARACTERIZATION IS THE bedrock of fiction and the reason most people read it. What endures in our hearts and minds over time is the heroes, heroines, and villains. Less often do we recall their plots. The fiction writer's greatest challenge is character development. How many of the following characters do you recognize? Dorothy, Glenna, Harry Potter, Bilbo Baggins and Frodo, Hannibal Lecter, Rabbit, Quoyle, David Carraggio, Sula, Sethe, Gus McCrae and Woodrow Call, Garp, Kabuo, Tita, Jick McCaskill, Tom Wingo, Jack Ryan, Sherlock Holmes, Scarlet and Rhett, Kinsey Millhone, V. I. Warshawski, Nero Wolfe, and Jonathan Livingston Seagull. For every character you recognized, now summarize his or her plot.

Most people can more easily describe characters than plots. (But did you find, as I did, that your recall of plot or story is higher when you've also seen the movie?) Characters based on stories outlive plots.

What Makes a Character?

Every fiction writer must answer one critical question before all others: What makes characters so memorable that they outlive their creators? In former classes I've taught on characterization, my students have diligently sought an answer. Although "memorable" must be defined quite differently across cultures, and from one person to the next, we managed to agree on the following qualities:

- Characters are larger than life and live outside social norms and conformity in some way.
- They evoke reactions in others, often creating empathy.
- They have one particular dimension of their personality that is strong—so much so that it may make them single-minded and self-absorbed—yet they typically attract and inspire others.
- They often have a passion and depth of feeling that they "wear on the outside."
- They nearly always have a contradiction that is at odds with their beliefs or passions.
- They may have an unusual or prominent sense of humor.
- Overall, they tend to be unapologetically and unself-consciously themselves.
- They seem to have more courage of self-expression to pursue their passions, but in truth, their drives and personality may give them no other choice.

When you can replace each general statement with specifics that describe your protagonist, antagonist, and other main characters, you will be well on your way to creating a character that will outlive you.

Anyone who writes a series, for instance, understands the need to create a strong and distinctive character to "carry" the series.

Characters are larger than life and live outside social norms and conformity in some way.

Writing from the Inside Out

For some time, I've identified two ways to construct realistic characters. To make characters live and breathe, writers must write "from the inside out" and "from the outside in."

From the inside out refers to making a conscious connection between your inner emotions, needs, and thoughts and the same in your characters. Anyone can create an entertaining character off the top of their head. However, the story people that will move readers—make them laugh, cry, fear, and exult—spring from deep inside their creators.

Most writers have heard the expression "thinly veiled autobiography," referring to the idea that we project ourselves and our life experiences into the stories we call fiction. Usually, the use of this expression brings a laugh. Why? Because many people assume that an autobiographical story is of lesser quality than one freed of the "ties that bind."

I agree that when fiction writers simply re-create their lives and personas on paper, the result is rarely successful. Why? Because fiction is a selective representation of reality. The art of fiction directs the readers' focus on highly specific details carefully chosen for their meaning, story value, and relevance to a singular story goal. Everything else is extraneous. The best fiction is free of the fetters of reality. Yet, fiction divorced from an author's emotions and spirit comes across like a soulless zombie. Even so, many writers struggle with expressing emotion and spirit.

To make characters live and breathe, writers must write "from the inside out" and "from the outside in."

HARVESTING THE EMOTIONS

Writing from the inside out takes courage. It also takes careful listening to your inner responses. Take a draft of a story you've written, read it aloud or silently, but read it *slowly*. Place your full attention on what emotions surface as you let yourself become, vicariously, your character. As your character runs into opposition from others and the environment, how do *you* feel? Pause and "harvest" all of your feelings and thoughts. Note them, then read on and do the same for the next sentence, paragraph, or section.

What most of my students report is that their stories have many events that trigger a host of emotions, few of which make their way onto the page. The late Jack Bickham, a writing instructor and novelist, discussed "stimulus" and "response." When you create an event in your story, especially a dramatic or upsetting event, it is a stimulus that requires a response from your point-of-view character.

Characters can't live and breathe from now into eternity unless they feel, and feel deeply. Be their response ever so small, such as a raised eyebrow or a verbal "yeah, right," to be believable, your characters must constantly show their humanity. Emotion is what moves most readers to care, but readers have sophisticated bullshit meters and will recognize and reject inauthentic emotion. The real deal comes from the inside out, and you are the source of your characters' reality.

Examples abound, but think about distinctiveness of character and how emotion is evoked as you read the following example, the beginning of Annie Proulx's Pulitzer Prize–winning novel, *The Shipping News.*

> Hive-spangled, gut roaring with gas and cramp, he [Quoyle] survived childhood. . . . He ate prodigiously, liked a ham knuckle, buttered spuds.
>
> . . . At thirty-six, bereft, brimming with grief and thwarted love, Quoyle steered away to Newfoundland. . . .
>
> A watery place. And Quoyle feared water, could not swim.

Again and again the father had broken his clenched grip and thrown him into pools, brooks, lakes and surf. Quoyle knew the flavor of brack and waterweed.

From this youngest son's failure to dog-paddle the father saw other failures multiply like an explosion of virulent cells—failure to speak clearly; failure to sit up straight; failure to get up in the morning; failure in ambition and ability; indeed, in everything. His own failure.

Notice how much you know about Quoyle from this relatively short sketch, but also notice what emotions the author has evoked. I already care about Quoyle because I empathize with his loneliness, self-hatred, and helplessness. I pity him. I am angry at his father. I want him to have a turn of fate for the better. He seems to have already suffered a lifetime's worth of pain.

IMMUTABLE AND TRANSITORY TRUTH

To write authentically, from the inside out, you must know your point-of-view character's "immutable truth" (about self, others, and the world). It is a perception that changes little. You must also know your character's "transitory truth," a perception that is relevant to an immediate situation, an experience that will change as often as several times on one page. Read the following example drawn from non–Pulitzer Prize writing that is nonetheless well written. I've italicized the words that convey or imply the protagonist's transitory truth.

In *The House on Hope Street*, by Danielle Steel, attorney Jack Sutherland has been shot to death. His wife, protagonist Liz Sutherland, has told their five children and is making funeral arrangements as she talks with Jean, the law firm's secretary.

Did he want to be cremated or buried? They had never talked about it, and Liz felt *sick* as they did now. There was so much to think about and do. [implies *overwhelmed*] *Hideous* details to be *coped* with. The obituary had to be written, the minister called, the casket chosen, all of it so *grim*, so *unbelievable*, so *terrifying*.

. . . She felt a wave of *panic* wash over her, and . . . all she wanted to do was *scream*. This couldn't be happening to them. [implied *shock, fear*] Where was he? And how was she going to live without him? What would happen to her and her children?

All she did in the end was bow her head and *sob*, as it *hit* her with full force again, *like an express train*. Her husband had been shot and killed by a lunatic . . . she and the kids were *alone* now.

Even from this short snippet, we see that Liz is a caring person who loved her husband. This is her immutable truth; it is unlikely to change. Even though she suffers with her own grief, she thinks of others. We see that she is responsible, wants to do the right thing, and that even in shock and grief she has a highly organized mind that keeps ticking off what must be done. A character's immutable truth is mostly set, but the transitory truth will change, and should change, as the character moves through time and encounters obstacles and demands. Summoning the wherewithal to overcome opposition to story goals, a character evokes even deeper truths, which in turn lead back to the one immutable truth at the heart of the story—and possibly at the heart of the writer.

Danielle Steel's portrayal of Liz's shock, grief, and adjustment strike the reader as authentic and moving, albeit a transitory truth. Has the author harvested her own emotions and connected them to her protagonist as appropriate for what Liz is experiencing? I have to believe this is true. In her memoir, *His Bright Light: The True Story of Nick Traina*, Danielle Steel shares her fight to understand and help Nick, her mentally ill son. A divorcee who struggled to make ends meet and raise her large family, Danielle Steel did remarry but then suffered the suicide of Nick, her firstborn. Steel knows exactly what her protagonist would feel and is able to infuse her emotions into Liz. The result is a moving and authentic portrayal of recovery from loss on the bedrock of the immutable truth of love.

A character's immutable truth is mostly set, but the transitory truth will change, and should change, as the character moves through time and encounters obstacles and demands.

LITERARY REGRESSION

For most writers, nailing down specifics for plot, setting, era, or genre may come far more easily than developing characters. However, even if your characters, especially your hero or heroine, spring nearly full-blown into your mind, you still probably don't know them well enough to write about them in a convincing and authentic way. An old cliché among fiction teachers is that you've got to know your characters better than your closest friend, even better than your spouse.

To accomplish this enormous job, I've created a list of questions in Map 2-1 to help you get to know your characters from the inside out, a process I call "literary regression." Depth of characterization makes a demand upon fiction writers to develop a psychological understanding of people that goes beyond the superficial interactions of everyday life. For some writers, plot development and working on characters from the outside in precedes their ability to answer the following questions. If this is true for you, return to this list after you solidify your plot. Remember, there is no right way; there is only your way.

Writing from the Outside In

If writing from the inside out involves "harvesting emotions," writing from the outside in involves thinking and making choices. Characters, like the real-life people they emulate, are complex beings—or should be. You are the architect of their complexity. The task of "building" a character can be somewhat simplified by approaching the job in broad categories, such as the physical description, sociological or environmental factors, and emotional or psychological traits. As you'll discover, however, your job as a writer is not merely selecting characteristics from a menu. Your job is to choose descriptors that in combination with others deepen reader curiosity in the whole story. Reader curiosity generates suspense to find out more. Suspense be-

MAP 2-1

Literary Regression
Discovering Your Characters from the Inside Out

Instructions: Take your point-of-view characters on a "literary regression" by asking them these questions:

Goals	*What was most important to your character at age five, fifteen, nineteen, and at the age at which the story or novel begins?*
Motivation	*What were your character's deepest longings at various ages? Which singular longing has been with him or her since childhood?*
Positive Trait	*What qualities in your character are he or she most proud of? What would friends say is your character's most shining quality?*
Negative Trait	*What is your character's greatest weakness and worst personality trait? What would friends say is his or her biggest weakness?*
Nickname	*What were your character's nicknames? Why was he or she called them?*
Self-Concept	*What words would be inscribed on your character's headstone that best capture the way he or she would like to be remembered? Example: He was a friend to all.*
Fear	*What is your character's greatest fear? When did he or she first feel it?*
Trauma	*What was the most traumatic experience in your character's life?*

Continued

Secret	*What disclosure about your character or his or her actions would your character do almost anything to keep from becoming public knowledge?*
Power	*When the chips are down, what is your character's greatest "weapon," the ace up his or her sleeve?*
Adversaries	*What person(s) have most blocked your character's success?*
Allies	*Who can your character count on during life's highs and lows?*
Darkest Hour	*What were the lowest points in your character's childhood, teens, twenties, thirties, and so forth? Times when he or she thought they might not be able to go on living?*
Shining Moments	*What were the high points of your character's childhood, teens, twenties, thirties, and so forth? Times when he or she figured they had it made?*
Legacy	*What message does your character want the world to hear? What would he or she like to leave behind as a gift to others?*

After you also develop your characters from the outside in, return to your answers to the questions in Map 2-1 and integrate the two.

comes an emotional energy that a writer can manipulate. Like an engineer monitoring the amount of pressure driving a piston, the writer's choice of words, including description of characters, can increase suspense or lower it.

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

How people look is often the first way we meet them, and those looks encompass the physical body, dress, and mannerisms. Notice how vividly Annie Proulx describes the character Quoyle in *The Shipping News*: "a damp loaf of a body . . . buried under a casement of flesh . . . no neck, reddish hair ruched back . . . eyes the color of plastic . . . a freakish shelf jutting from the lower face." These details of a character's appearance are exactly what editors and agents mean when they say "fresh and original" writing. Taken separately and alone, Proulx's choice of words to describe Quoyle resembles an alchemist's base metals. Together, out of her creative expression, the descriptions have such clarity and force they are transmuted into gold.

As readers lend their energy through the act of reading and absorbing her story, they, too, become part of the alchemic transformation. It is unlikely that anyone who reads *The Shipping News* will forget Quoyle. In fact, it is most likely that readers will continue to relate to this character within their own mental and emotional worlds long after finishing the book, even though on the outside, he seems like the most ordinary of men.

Describing a character is a difficult skill for beginning and experienced writers alike. You'll make a mistake if you merely rattle off a list of basic information: height, weight, hair color, eye color, age, race. This shows the hand of the writer and is dubbed "author intrusion." In other words, a list breaks the magical spell that has transported the reader into your story. The individual base metals remain so; no matter how the writer mixes up the list, they won't produce gold. One of the best ways to keep the reader in the story is to make your descriptions colored by the attitude and perspective of the point-of-view character.

Mystery writer Carl Hiaasen, renowned for his characterization, produces characters as "fresh and original" as Proulx's, in an entirely different category of fiction. For example, from his novel *Strip Tease*, Hiaasen introduces a new character, a lobbyist named Malcolm J. Moldowsky, "Moldy" for short. I've italicized the words that convey the "coloring" or attitude of the character Dilbeck, a congressman, toward Moldowsky.

> Moldowsky was a short man, *distractingly short*, but he made up for it by dressing like royalty and *slathering* himself with expensive cologne. It was easy to be so impressed by *Moldy*'s fabulous wardrobe and exotic aroma that one might overlook his words, which invariably were important. . . . Moldowsky's *upper lip curled*, exposing the small and *pointy dentition of a lesser primate*. . . . Dilbeck felt the heat of Moldowsky pressing closer—smelled the sharp minty breath and inhaled the imported Italian musk, *which was strong enough to gas termites.*

I believe the italicized words convey Dilbeck's dislike and disdain of Malcolm Moldowsky. Reread Hiaasen's description once again, but skip the italicized words. Without their "color," you have a bland, almost list-like description of a character. Dilbeck's attitude, his visceral reaction and opinion of Moldy, add what is referred to as *edge*. Edge means potential or implied conflict, and conflict means suspense; maintaining varying degrees of suspense is your constant job.

Tags are visible markers, usually superficial, of characterization, but they may also have deeper roots. Consider Rex Stout's sleuth, Nero Wolfe, who is an obese, orchid-tending genius with a compulsion for food, books, and solving murders. If you study people, you'll discover one or several tags for nearly everyone. As you construct your characters, assign them visible tags. Assign gestures or body language: a flick of the wrist, the nervous tapping toe, the filing of fingernails. Use the same facial expressions: pouting lips, arching eyebrows, blinking eyes. Show a tag for food and beverage preferences: Mexican mocha every morning, pretzels every after-

noon, a shot of Drambuie every evening. Choose other behavioral tags that appear in specific settings: walking completely around a car before getting in, shaking salt into the palm prior to use on food, stacking books and magazines on desks and tables and never reshelving them.

Ideally, every character could have a speech tag as part of the ordinary speech. Some people say "yup" instead of yes, "nix" instead of no, or "you know" or "make my day" after every phrase, as if they want to drive you crazy. Some people call female friends and strangers alike "honey," "missy," "darling," "sweetie," or "ma'am."

Several rules of thumb will help summarize how to handle description:

- Describe characters soon after they enter a scene for the first time.
- Add to the description in subsequent scenes.
- Weave in a character's description by making it a part of the scene. One of the best ways to accomplish this is by intermixing description with your point-of-view character's thoughts, scene goals, and small scene actions.
- Make descriptions reflect "attitude," your point-of-view character's subjective perceptions and prejudices. Avoid being a video camera, robotlike in reporting the new character's appearance and demeanor.
- Create tags that further emphasize character individuality. Use them for shorthand descriptions, but don't overuse them or they'll seem like author intrusion.
- Include a broad array of physical description to show gender; age; height and weight; color of hair, eyes, skin; clothing; overall appearance; habitual behavior; posture, carriage, and demeanor; and noticeable deformities, injuries, or inherited peculiarities.

The resource box on page 30 offers a reading list of craft books to further your knowledge about characterization.

SOCIOLOGICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

Start by donning the cap of the census taker: Besides physical facts, determine each character's country of origin, citizenship, age, generation (WWII, baby boomer, echo, Gen-X), marital status, and dependents. Add sociological information such as income, social class, work, and education. Think about geography, not only about your character's country, state, and city, but about neighborhood, living situation, and home ownership. Decide ethnicity, religious heritage and participation, political beliefs and affiliations, and volunteer work.

Next determine relationship data: parents—living or dead, married, separated, divorced, or remarried; siblings—birth order, frequency of contact, and closeness of relationships; colleagues and coworkers—everyday to faraway; friends—their gender, how long they have known them, how they met, closeness, and their role in your character's life; former spouses and lovers, and who did what, when, and to whom, i.e., who broke off the relationships or who proposed. What are the issues in these closest relationships that created conflict and remain unresolved?

Cultural values may or may not match social class and education. An attorney may love square dancing and a garbage collector may love opera. We all have likes and dislikes and so must your characters. Think of the diverse aspects of our culture and assign preferences that fit each of your point-of-view characters. Music, art, architecture, books, movies, plays, interior décor, cars, clothing, hats, and personal scents. Additionally, likes and dislikes can apply to people. Which politicians, actors, and news anchors, for instance, win your characters' praise or insults?

The following excerpt, from *Where the Heart Is* (winner of the Walker Percy Award) by Billie Letts, shows further development of her protagonist, Novalee, through development of sociological and environmental factors:

The only library Novalee had ever been inside before was the bookmobile that came to the grade school in Tellico Plains. . . . She . . . pulled out *The Dream House Encyclopedia.* She flipped through the pages but the pictures were not in color. . . . "I want to know about buckeye trees," she said. . . .

"Buckeye! The horse chestnut. Belonging to the genus *Aesculus* of the family *Hippocastanaceae.*"

"What? I can't understand what you're saying."

[*A page later*]: He shook his head . . . his voice dipping to a whisper. "*The tree has no leaves and may never have them again. We must wait till some months hence in the spring to know. But if it is destined never to grow, it can blame this limitless trait in the heart of men.*"

Novalee watched his lips shape the words . . . the sounds, like whispered secrets, hanging in the air.

***Characters and Viewpoint*, by Orson Scott Card**

***Writing Dialogue*, by Tom Chiarella**

***The Complete Writer's Guide to Heroes and Heroines*, by Tami D. Cowden, Caro LaFever, and Sue Viders**

***The Writer's Guide to Character Traits*, by Linda N. Edelstein**

***Creating Character Emotions*, by Ann Hood**

***The Romance Writer's Phrase Book*, by Jean Salter Kent and Candace Shelton**

***Dynamic Characters*, by Nancy Kress**

***The Writer's Digest Sourcebook for Building Believable Characters*, by Marc McCutcheon**

***Voice & Style*, by Johnny Payne**

***45 Master Characters*, by Victoria Schmidt**

***Creating Unforgettable Characters*, by Linda Seger**

Letts draws deeply from lower-class environmental and sociological details to develop a rich and endearing portrayal of her protagonist Novalee. She'd never been in a library, perhaps doesn't have access to one. The difference in education, which often corresponds to socio-economic class, shows in her lack of understanding of what the librarian says, perhaps not even recognizing Latin or the scientific description of the tree.

EMOTIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAITS

If necessary, look for psychological disorders in the DMS-IV, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* published by the American Psychiatric Association. Decide which neuroses, mood disorders, or psychoses best fit each of your character's inclinations. Compulsions? If so, what repeated behaviors? Checking door locks? Counting items? Phobias? Of what? Avoid clichéd phobias such as acrophobia (fear of heights) and claustrophobia (abnormal fear of closed spaces). For example, Jack Reacher, the protagonist in Lee Child's novel *Tripwire*, is a physically big and powerful ex–military policeman, yet he is so desperately afraid of commitment that he is afraid to own a home or hold a real job. His fears serve to break his Schwarzenegger stereotype and render him vulnerable in an appealing way.

Moody or manic? How often does your character "cycle," and what are the external triggers to a plunge downward or a surge upward? Even heroic characters can have diagnosable patterns that contribute to their dimensionality. As a psychiatrist friend of mine once said, "Every person put under enough stress will break down in ways that correspond to genetic predisposition and personality traits."

Some of your characters may gain depth by development of a personality disorder. One resource for finding descriptions of the behaviors and symptoms for these extreme or diagnosable personalities is *Random House Webster's Word Menu*, by Stephen Glazier.

Personality disorders, compulsions, and fears make colorful character traits and tags. Also remember that not only should they rear their heads to make trouble for your character, they should also offer a gift. In the extreme, they are useful for development of complex protagonists. *The Madness of a Seduced Woman*, a psychological thriller by Susan Fromberg Schaeffer, has drawn acclaim for her turn-of-the-century Vermont protagonist, Agnes Dempster, who is obsessed by love and, when betrayed, driven to murder. Or consider J. D. Salinger's classic antihero, Holden Caulfield, in *The Catcher in the Rye*. Almost any psychologist in an intake evaluation would diagnose Holden as depressed and narcissistic. More recently, the protagonist in *White Noise*, by Don DeLillo, is a professor of "Hitler studies." He has a neurotic fear of death only surpassed by his wife's even greater fear of death. The resource box lists a small sample of possible phobias and compulsions, although I would add these three: cybermania, e-mailmania, and videogamemania.

Toned down, disorders, compulsions, and fears can add charm and distinctiveness to a character. Sherlock Holmes, not withstand-

CHARACTER TWISTS: MANIAS AND PHOBIAS

MANIAS (Compulsions):
***anthromania*: craze for flowers; *entomomania*: craze for insects; *glazomania*: craze for listmaking; *necromania*: obsessed with the dead; *oniomania*: uncontrollable compulsion to buy; *timbromania*: inordinate enthusiasm for postage stamps**

PHOBIAS (Unreasonable Fears):
***agoraphobia*: fear of crowds or open places; *eisoptrophobia*: fear of mirrors; *gephyrophobia*: fear of crossing bridges; *ophiciophobia*: fear of snakes; *pyrophobia*: fear of fire; *scotophobia*: fear of dark; *tapephobia*: fear of being buried alive; *triskaidekaphobia*: fear of the number thirteen**

WEB SITES FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL TESTS AND PROFILES

Myers-Briggs Personality Inventory: www.humanmetrics.com; www.gsu.edu/;sldschjb@wwumbti.html

Astrological Sun Sign Descriptions: astrology-online.com/persn.htm; nanceestar.com/astros2.html

Enneagrams: www.9types.com; www.people.fas.harvard.edu/;sltchou

ing his addiction to morphine, has charmed generations with his mad-scientist edge. Billie Letts' protagonist, Novalee Nation, in *Where the Heart Is*, is ever more endearing to us because of her superstition about the number seven.

Psychology offers many aids to developing the emotional side of characters. Personality tests, for instance, provide broad categorization of our inclinations. One common test, based on theories by Carl Jung, is the Myers-Briggs Personality Inventory. It rates people for extroversion/introversion, intuition/rationality, thinking/feeling, and judging/perceiving. By reading how the Myers-Briggs defines each of these sets of terms, you may think of your characters differently and in greater depth.

Another way to get a handle on your characters' personalities is through the ancient typing system of astrology. A basic book on sun signs, such as *Linda Goodman's Sun Signs*, can give you a rich description of twelve different types of people, from Aries to Pisces. Use Goodman's sun-sign profiles to find your point-of-view characters, and then assign them a birth date. Some writers go so far as to construct full birth charts, i.e., horoscopes, of their protagonists, and acquire full interpretations of their strengths, weaknesses, and potential.

The Enneagram: Understanding Yourself and the Others in Your Life, by Helen Palmer, was published in 1999 and offers fiction writers yet another tool for character development. The Enneagram de-

scribes nine strong personality types. Here is a summary of the nine types and their corresponding core fears. I've supplied a literary example to match each Enneagram.

1. The Reformer/Critic: Fears evil or corruption (Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, by Harper Lee)
2. The Helper/Lover: Fears being unloved and unappreciated (Celie in *The Color Purple*, by Alice Walker)
3. The Achiever/Motivator: Fear of being seen as a failure (Jay Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby*, by F. Scott Fitzgerald)
4. The Artist/Romantic: Fears being seen as ordinary (Struther in *The Ambassadors*, by Henry James)
5. The Thinker/Analyst: Fears being overwhelmed by others (David Caravaggio in *The English Patient*, by Michael Ondaatje)
6. The Loyalist/Pessimist: Fears being unsupported by others (Silas Marner in *Silas Marner*, by George Eliot)
7. The Enthusiast/Optimist: Fears being deprived and in pain (Phineas in *A Separate Peace*, by John Knowles)
8. The Leader/Boss: Fears being in a subordinate position (Jo March in *Little Women*, by Louisa May Alcott)
9. The Mediator/Peacemaker: Fears conflict and disharmony (Tita in *Like Water for Chocolate*, by Laura Esquivel)

If you are interested in the Enneagram approach to character development, *The Literary Enneagram*, by Judith Searle, is an excellent resource. You can also find many web sites on the ideas and test.

The emotional and psychological nature of characters goes beyond these fascinating traits and problems. Depending upon your story, you may need to build your characters' romantic histories, in-

cluding their attitudes toward sexuality. Because most novels include a romantic subplot, determine not only your characters' sexual histories but also their moral values. Kissing a woman when you're a married man may be traitorous in one value system and the spice of life in another.

Consider giving every character a distinctive sense of humor, no matter what kind of story you are writing.

Morality extends to what your character views as fair play. Cheating and bribery? The white lie or full-on lying? I'll never forget my neighbor who told his daughter that lying was okay—as long as she made sure she got away with it. I was shocked. Until that moment, my world view had included an absolute: Parents always teach children never to lie. Further, I had been raised with the belief that lying is immoral. However, now that I've left my sheltered youth, I realize that "telling the truth" exists on a continuum of interpretations, and in rare cases, telling the truth can lead to unconscionable harm. When you develop your characters, you get the chance to select what they believe and how they act, and those two things may not agree.

The emotional and psychological nature also includes a character's goals and passions, his likes and dislikes, his trust of hunches or his reliance on logic alone, and his style of intelligence from streetwise to brainy. His profile should also include his brand of humor.

Consider giving every character a distinctive sense of humor, no matter what kind of story you are writing. Perhaps one character is droll and dry and another is slapstick, or one character tells jokes while another relies on puns. Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson play off each other with their humor, Holmes's sharp and dry wit complementing Watson's jolliness. Sometimes, humor can be the primary way a character is drawn. In Melissa Bank's novel, *The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing*, the author not only entertains the reader with Jane's humor, but she uses it as an integral part of Jane's character, as her defense against vulnerability.

Character-Development Tools

Every writer has a different way of developing characters, including different needs for depth and detail. The latter is not necessarily dependent upon the length of the story. Some short stories are meticulous studies of character, and some novels seem to barely develop characters beyond caricatures.

Many writers keep characterization files that resemble dossiers. For some, this is a section in their "novel notebooks," three-ring notebooks where they record ideas and research into all aspects of a novel in progress. Other writers open a characterization file or folder in their word processing programs. Still others use index cards of varying sizes and colors on which to record enough data to refresh their memories as they write. That way they avoid embarrassment of a change of eye color in a later chapter.

No matter what system you use to keep track of your characterization details, the most important thing is that you do think about your characters—from the outside in *and* from the inside out—before and during the writing process.

When you have sketched as much of the information in this chapter about your primary characters as you care to, are you done with your pre-writing work on characters? Not yet. After you establish your story and plot, you'll need to join characterization with story with plot, as covered in chapter seven. In the next two chapters, you'll learn how to lay down the foundation of your story, the full support necessary to set your characters in motion.

THREE

Finding a Map for Your Story

Form and function are a unity, two sides of one coin. In order to enhance function, appropriate form must exist or be created.
Ida P. Rolf

I'M SOMEONE WHO has a poorer than average sense of direction. As a result, I have no compunction about stopping to ask directions. A few years ago, I visited my friend Jeannie in Minneapolis, my first time there. When we reached her office, she handed me the keys to her car and a map, and said, "Just be back to pick me up at 5:30."

My day alternated between getting lost and getting un-lost, consulting my map, seeing the sights, and having a great time. But by 5:15 P.M. I drove within a few miles of Jeannie's office . . . before getting lost again. Finally, I called her secretary for directions and made it back to her office with just minutes to spare. Despite all the wrong turns, I ended the day with a terrific sense of accomplishment, the feeling of being the lucky recipient of a miracle. Without a map, I would have been out of luck.

I often meet writers who write a short story, screenplay, or novel without a map. They have neither outline nor plan. I can understand their choice—and predict their failure. I, too, once wrote a novel without any planning or knowledge of craft, and I've had dozens of students or editing clients who have done the same. I can't think of one case where the resulting story wasn't a mishmash disaster.

With the exception of an occasional literary genius, fiction writers need outlines, at least until they master the craft and earn the right to eschew such conventions. I fully understand wanting to take the joy ride of creation without preparation or even a planned destination. Perhaps some writers believe that preparation or structure will stifle creativity. Moment-by-moment creation is an exhilarating experience. Planning and plotting require thinking and searching—and that's hard work.

The payoff for learning how to map your stories, however, is saving time—perhaps years of rejections—lost by "free" writing. Most of all, you'll gain confidence in your knowledge of how to structure fiction. Fortunately, there is no dearth of advice for how to plan and plot. Beginning with Aristotle (and perhaps even earlier in time) many people have theorized how to outline and plan stories.

For fiction writers, "mapping" involves determining an overall structure for your piece—short story, novella, or novel—as well as working out the intricacies of plot within that larger structure. Shifting metaphors a bit, you won't end up with the Taj Mahal if the blueprint, i.e., map, you are using is for the Sears Tower. Particular structures fit some kinds or genres of stories better than others. Once you understand what story structures fiction writers typically use, you may one day decide to experiment and create your own.

After presenting classic three-part and five-part structure, the following pages will briefly outline other story structures: vignette/slice-of-life story, epistolary, picaresque, hourglass, double plot/parallel plot, frame story, flashback story, and circular structure.

As Simple as 1-2-3-4-5

You can never go wrong if you stick to the basics. In fiction the most basic form of all stories is a three-step structure: situation, complication, resolution. Slightly more developed and of greater use is a five-step structure:

1. a character with a problem
2. complications
3. crises that reach a climax
4. resolution of the problem
5. character learns something about self or life

For conventional short stories the three-part and five-part structures are most common. Every writer should be thoroughly versed in them before "going experimental." If you get lost or confused, return to this five-part structure for orientation, whether you are writing a novel or a short story.

In fact, as a matter of definition, short stories are not "miniature novels," like *Reader's Digest* condensations, any more than TV sitcoms are short feature films. A short story is complete unto itself. Even those as long as ten thousand words, the "outer limit" of short stories, feature one central conflict. The development around that conflict usually rises in dramatic intensity, leading to a single crisis and the climax. This development defines what is known as "the story arc." The five-part structure will guide you in mapping most stories you wish to write. Notice how these two common children's stories fit the conventional pattern:

Here is an outline for *Little Red Riding Hood* (the Grimm's version):

1. Grandma is ill, and LRRH's mother tells her to take a basket of food and a flask of wine to Grandma and not to stray into the woods.
2. LRRH encounters Wolf and tells all, stops to pick flowers at his suggestion, giving him lead time, and then she arrives safely at Grandma's house.
3. Grandma acts strangely, revealed as the Wolf about to eat LRRH, like he already has Grandma. Wolf fools LRRH, eats her, and falls asleep.

4. Woodsman hears loud snoring, saves the day, uses shears to open Wolf's belly, saving LRRH and Grandma. LRRH puts stones in cavity, Wolf is sewn up, and he awakes alone with a bellyache.

5. If you talk to strangers, you could end up with a wolf in your bed—or worse. Or, the usual moral: Mind your mother and never stray into the woods.

Read the five-part outline for *Three Little Pigs*:

1. TLP need to build shelters to protect them from Big Bad Wolf.

2. Two of the pigs heckle and tease the methodical pig who is taking a longer time to build his house because of his choice of building materials, i.e., brick, while they take the easy route with sticks and straw.

3. BBW threatens the pigs, then blows down first one flimsy house, and then the second, sending brother pigs into smartest pig's house of bricks.

4. BBW threatens remaining house, but it is too strong and he sidles away to find an easier target in storyland. The pigs decide communal living is the answer, or they will build three brick houses at a future date.

5. Patience and foresight can save your bacon.

At its simplest, you can take most novels, even complex or lengthy ones, and find the five-part structure that forms the skeleton. Of course it's easier to find this conventional structure in genre fiction—mystery, romance, science fiction, fantasy, and horror—than in mainstream or literary novels, but even these works will usually reveal this underlying foundation.

Read the following breakdown of the five parts in Catherine Ryan

Hyde's literary novel, *Pay It Forward.* In contrast to the movie, the book ends differently and the character Reuben, the high-school teacher, is a black Vietnam vet. (Kevin Spacey, who is not black, plays the part of Reuben in the movie.) While some people might categorize *Pay It Forward* as inspirational fiction, I would categorize it as "stretched reality," a new term for American-style magical realism. Here is its five-part structure:

1. In response to the inciting incident—a school assignment to come up with a way to change the world—protagonist Trevor McKinney creates "pay it forward." He works out the math that if the three people he helps will in turn help three more people and tell them the same rule, in no time, everyone will be helping everyone.

2. Trevor's first choice is a homeless man, who, with Trevor's money and urging, improves his life briefly but then blows it. Trevor then picks an old woman, but she dies. His biggest apparent failure is matchmaking his alcoholic mom with Reuben, his teacher.

3. Unknown to Trevor, his idea is spreading. However, when his abusive, biological father returns and his mother spurns Reuben, Trevor's world hits bottom.

4. In time, his mother kicks out his father and reconciles with Reuben. A reporter finds Trevor, who learns that "pay it forward" has become a movement and President Clinton wants to meet him. After the meeting, Trevor believes he must help one more person to complete his three commitments to pay it forward. When he goes to the aid of a young man who is attacked by a gang on the streets of Washington, DC, Trevor is knifed and subsequently dies.

5. Everyone else—his mother and father, the reporter, millions of people, and eventually even his biological father,

commits to the "pay it forward" philosophy of caring and helping one another, and the world is transformed.

Other novels are obviously more complex than a five-part structure. In chapter four, you'll find outlines for entire novels based on the Hero's Journey by Joseph Campbell and the Heroine's Journey by Maureen Murdock. Map 3-1, which follows, offers some of the key elements of story structure.

Other Maps of Structure

A number of other organizational forms exist for stories that may not follow the five-part structure. Or the five-part structure may include the addition of one of these forms within it.

- vignette/slice-of-life story
- epistolary
- picaresque
- hourglass
- double plot/parallel plot
- frame story
- flashback story
- circular structure

Vignette/Slice-of-Life Story

Common to short stories, the vignette is a short scene, sketch, or a series of short scenes that vividly, often gracefully, describes people in a situation or even a "pickle." A well-known vignette is O'Henry's

MAP 3-1

Elements of Story Structure

Exposition: background information necessary for readers to understand what happens within a story and its protagonist

Problem: the dilemma at the heart of the story, inner and outer

Conflict: opposing forces that block resolution of the problem

Rising action: the intensification of action, events, and conflicts

Foreshadowing: hints about future events and conflicts

Crisis: an emotional turning point of higher drama and consequences

Climax: highest point of dramatic intensity or action where the external plot problem is resolved, one way or the other

Denouement (falling action): the outcome, sorting out what happened, finishing small conflicts

Epiphany or *Realization*: sudden insight by protagonist that provides new understanding of events from the past and leads to growth and understanding and fulfillment of a universal need or yearning

"The Gift of the Magi." The vignette often lacks a plot, which does not mean that it is devoid of conflict. The protagonist may experience conflict, outer as well as inner, and grapple with relationships, but resolution of a problem is not the goal as it typically is in classic story structure. The simple purpose of most vignettes or slice-of-life stories may be to develop a character such as in the gripping fictional memoir, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, by Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

The vignette or slice-of-life story may center on the author's exploration of an idea instead of a character. Others artfully convey an atmosphere or mood and downplay or omit plot, theme, or depth of characterization. They are often "open-ended," meaning that they offer no resolution or "ending," and reader satisfaction must come from the experience of the tightly drawn and/or vivid descriptions, or from artful writing.

The problem with this structure for beginning writers is that the success of the story rests entirely on the reader's interest in the writer's facility with writing. The three-part or five-part dramatic structure of fiction increases reader investment in seeing if and how the protagonist reaches the story goal and resolves the problem introduced in the beginning of the story.

For a writer who enjoys the artistry of word pictures, the vignette or slice-of-life story may be very satisfying. *The House on Mango Street*, by Sandra Cisneros, features forty-four vignettes that focus on Esperanza Cordero, a Hispanic girl "who longs for a room of her own and a house she can be proud of." When interviewed about her vignettes, Cisneros said, "I wanted stories like poems, compact and lyrical and ending with reverberation."

Epistolary

A difficult form to maintain narrative suspense, the plot of an epistolary story advances through letters or diaries. One of the best-known epistolary novels is *The Color Purple*, winner of the Pulitzer and the

American Book Award, written by Alice Walker. The protagonist is Celie, who was repeatedly raped by her stepfather, then escapes to a loveless marriage to a man who also beats her. The reader learns about her life through letters she writes to God. Another example of a successful epistolary novel is *Black Box*, by Amos Oz. In this novel, Alec, a sociologist and Israeli war hero, is living in the United States, exchanging letters with his ex-wife, Ilana, in which they discuss how to raise their son, who is a juvenile delinquent.

An advantage of the epistolary structure is the focus on seemingly uncensored revelations of the heart and mind of a narrator, giving readers a feeling of being a voyeur or a trusted confidant.

The most modern form of an epistolary structure involves e-mail. For instance, in *A Novel in E-Mails*, author Michael J. Rosen introduces fourteen-year-old protagonist Chase Riley, who becomes isolated from friends when his family moves from Columbus, Ohio, to a farmhouse sixty miles away. Through e-mails, e-mail newsletters, emoticons and all, Chase shares about his new world and questions animal rights as he explores the hunting, no-hunting issue.

Nick Bantock's The Griffin & Sabine fantasy series, which sold more than two million copies, is another good example of an epistolary. Not only does each illustrated novel in the trilogy contain a letter correspondence between Griffin Moss, a postcard designer in London, and Sabine Strohem, an illustrator of stamps living on an island in the South Pacific, some of the novels also contain actual postcards (front and back) and letters in envelopes pasted into the book.

An advantage of the epistolary structure is the focus on seemingly uncensored revelations of the heart and mind of a narrator, giving readers a feeling of being a voyeur or a trusted confidant. A weakness may be a plot that relies on an abundance of narration, i.e., telling, that can render boring all but the most original of writing.

Picaresque

The picaresque is a particular kind of episodic structure. Instead of being organized around a pressing problem and story goal to resolve it, the picaresque features a protagonist with a "general intention" that propels his decisions and actions. The picaresque may have plenty of drama and conflict. Larry McMurtry's *Lonesome Dove* is a perfect example; there is no problem that necessitates driving cattle to Montana. The primary motive of the trail ride would appear to be Gus's boredom.

Most of the time, the picaresque is an adventure. It is often a road trip, and the focus of interest for the reader is on the fascinating characters, incidents, and meaning these have on the protagonist and others. What helps lend unity and coherence to the picaresque is a single theme, whereas an episodic story may end up with several themes based on the string of incidents. Even though the picaresque is an adventure, the fantasy quest, which is also an adventure, most often uses the Hero's Journey form, which is covered in chapter four. Other famous picaresque novels include McMurtry's *Comanche Moon*, Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, and Cervantes's *Don Quixote.*

The Hourglass Plot

The hourglass structure is not so much a complete form unto itself as it is a structure that can be developed in addition to a five-part, or heroic journey, foundation. The hourglass structure presents parallel protagonists, including two stories that converge or cross and separate again. *The Ambassadors*, by Henry James, features an hourglass plot. The writer's burden is making sure that both stories convey the same theme and that both protagonists, or one protagonist and a main, point-of-view character, share a same yearning or story promise.

Double Plot/Parallel Plot

Every hourglass plot is a double plot, but not every double plot is an hourglass. In other words, some novels feature double plots where one is primary—that of the protagonist, and one is a subplot of a strong main character, whose story arc runs parallel to the protagonist's. *The Book of Daniel*, a National Book Award nominee, by E. L. Doctorow, is the fictional retelling of the Rosenberg spy case. The double plot shifts back and forth in time and viewpoint. In the 1950s' plot, the reader follows the conviction and electrocution of Paul and Roselle. In the 1960s' plot, the reader experiences the problems and consequences of their deaths on their son, Daniel, who is a graduate student at Columbia.

Some double plots have characters that exist in different eras. T. Coraghessan Boyle uses the double plot for *World's End*, a multigenerational story that shifts between the Van Wart family in the seventeenth century and the twentieth century. Similar to the hourglass plot, the characters in each double plot must share the unity of a same story promise and same theme. For instance, in Boyle's novel, the Van Wart family faces a moral reckoning for the lands they obtained from the Indians three centuries earlier. Also referred to as an "architectonic novel" by Henry James, the double plot may be longer than a novel with one plot, if the characters' lives in both plots are fully developed.

Frame Stories

The frame story is a common device used in short stories and in novels. Typically, one character is the narrator who introduces, i.e., "frames," the story and who finishes the story, which fills the interior. The time or location in the beginning and the end of the novel may be different from the story in the middle. Also called a "nested narrative," the frame story can have a story within a story within a story.

Chekhov is famous for his many framed short stories, including "About Love" and "Ariadne." Examples of frame novels include *Heart of Darkness*, by Joseph Conrad; *The World According to Garp*, by John Irving, which includes a short story and a portion of a novel within the actual novel; and *The Year of Silence*, by Madison Smartt Bell. This last novel begins and ends with a woman's suicide in the violent underworld of New York, while the middle of the novel moves backward and forward in time.

Flashback Story

A variation of the frame story, the flashback story may be set up by a narrator in one time and place and shift for the bulk of the story to a different time and place. The flashback story usually returns to the present. In Anne Tyler's *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, eighty-five-year-old Pearl recalls her life spent living in a run-down house in Baltimore. On her deathbed, she tells about each of her three children and their lives, revealing the wounds they suffered when abandoned by their father, a traveling salesman. The old woman or old man looking back is a common frame for a flashback story. In *The Autobiography of my Mother*, by Jamaica Kincaid, her narrator is Xuela, a seventy-year-old woman whose Carib mother died in childbirth. The novel recounts how she was raised first by a foster mother, a washerwoman, and then by an abusive stepmother.

Circular Structure

When a story's conclusion returns to the same, or similar, circumstances as the story's beginning, the story has circular structure. In contrast to the frame story, circular structure typically demonstrates no real change. In fact, no change may be the writer's purpose, illustrating a protagonist's failure to show growth or learning. In *By His Bootstraps*, by Robert Heinlein, the narrator finds himself dealing

with a future self. Every attempt to get out of the loop of the time paradox simply leads him back to starting over.

COUNTLESS other forms exist for telling stories and an infinite variation on those forms, including the older ones: parables, tales, and allegories. Yet the five-part structure, the additional structures listed above, and the heroic journey outlined in chapter four, cover the structure of the majority of stories.

Structure is only one consideration in your planning. Some experienced short-story writers would say that structure may not even be the most important consideration. And yet, finding the best structure for your stories establishes a foundation that frees you to express and explore other elements of craft and style.

Writing a novel is too enormous a project to free-write, without extensive planning, at least for all but a small number of writers. The next chapter covers, in detail, two major ways to map a novel.

FOUR

Heroes and Heroines

Travelers are always discoverers, especially those who travel by air. There are no signposts in the sky to show a man has passed that way before. There are no channels marked. The flier breaks each second into new uncharted seas.

Anne Morrow Lindbergh, North to the Orient

NOVELS ARE LARGE undertakings, and heroes and heroines are their driving force. Chapter two introduced the task of crafting memorable characters, a subject so important to writing compelling fiction that it will be introduced in ever-deepening steps in chapters six and seven.

Novels require more comprehensive mapping than covered in the former chapter. We'll cover two heroic journey structures, the Hero's Journey and the Heroine's Journey, and offer an outlined book example of each one.

After TV journalist Bill Moyers interviewed the late mythologist Joseph Campbell in the late 1980s, and after the publication of Campbell's book, *The Power of Myth*, the Hero's Journey began to seep into the collective knowledge of our culture. Eventually, it was "discovered" by screenwriters and novelists and has been the "gold standard" of story structure ever since.

As an editor and writing instructor, I have recommended the Hero's Journey as the best map for structuring novels since about

1990. As we approached the millennium, however, a disquieting voice inside me questioned the viability of this archetype for some novels, women's mainstream and literary fiction in particular. My research led me to discover the outline of the "heroine's journey" in a book by the same name written by psychotherapist Maureen Murdock. Even though Murdock, like Vogler, knew Campbell personally, and her book was published in 1990, little of the Heroine's Journey has become known to novelists. I include it here as a whole-novel structure that may fit some writers' stories better than the Hero's Journey.

The Hero's and Heroine's Journeys describe the human quest for knowledge and growth, adding sophistication and detail to the classical three-part, or five-part, story structure.

Both the Hero's and Heroine's Journeys describe the human quest for knowledge and growth. Both journeys add sophistication and detail to the classical three-part, or five-part, story structure. The Hero's and Heroine's Journeys describe a journey or quest rather than a situational drama with theatrical origins, which is where we get the three- or five-part structure. The different forms are conceptually different but harmonious. In fact, the two heroic journeys have the classical dramatic structure embedded within their steps.

In his academic studies of myth, in most cultures across time, Campbell recognized a universal pattern called an *archetype*. Originally published as part of a larger, exceedingly complex work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, the Hero's Journey Campbell identified has three stages:

1. Departure, Separation
2. Descent, Initiation, Penetration
3. Return

Campbell then filled in six interim steps for each of these primary steps in the journey.

His multistep outline swept through the screen-writing and

fiction-writing community. It was adopted by Christopher Vogler, story consultant and executive at Twentieth Century Fox. As one of Campbell's protégés, Vogler simplified Campbell's language and made his work accessible to writers, producing *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, a reference book that belongs in every writer's library.

Here are the steps in a blended version of both Campbell's and Vogler's Hero's Journey:

ACT ONE: Departure, Separation

1. The Ordinary World/Hero at Home
2. Call to Adventure/The Challenge
3. Refusal of the Call/Elimination of The Expendable Person
4. Meeting with the Mentor
5. Crossing the First Threshold into the Special World

ACT TWO: Descent, Initiation, Penetration

6. Road of Tests and Trials/Allies and Enemies
7. Approach to the Inmost Cave
8. Belly of the Whale/Meeting with the Goddess, Temptress; Atonement
9. Ordeal/Life and Death Struggle
10. Reward

ACT THREE: Return

11. Refusal of the Return
12. The Ultimate Test/Resurrection
13. Return with the Elixir/Master of Two Worlds

A high percentage of all fully developed stories reveal the structure of the Hero's Journey, whether or not the writer consciously knew about the archetype. The advantage to writers who learn to use the Hero's Journey is that they can produce a sophisticated and detailed blueprint for their stories and feel confident in their works' structural foundation. The Hero's Journey is like an insurance policy.

You have lots of opportunities to leave out, shuffle, or add options, but you have the security of basic coverage.

The Hero's Journey, in its many variations, is a proven structure for outlining almost any story you would conceive. Although a short story is too short to demonstrate the entire Hero's Journey, by knowing the steps, you can select which ones to emphasize. This knowledge may help you deepen your writing.

I recommend that you memorize the basic steps of the Hero's Journey as the fiction writer's equivalent of the musician's memorization of scales. Train yourself to identify the steps in movies and novels. Outline your longer stories and novels using this map, and you'll be able to write more quickly and make far fewer revisions.

Jaws—Applying the Hero's Journey Outline

I chose to apply the heroic quest archetype to the story and movie *Jaws* for several reasons. Though it was originally a book, nearly everyone has seen the movie, probably several times. No lofty literary work, *Jaws* is as down-to-earth as it gets and yet, as you'll see, its story reflects this archetype. Because the story is also simple, I felt I could show the "bones" of the Hero's Journey better than with a more complex work.

Jaws launched Peter Benchley's career, and the movie became an instant classic, along with a musical phrase that became synonymous with "killer shark." Below, I've outlined its Hero's Journey, inspired by Stuart Voytilla's outline in *Myth and the Movies*, including some variations.

1. ***Hero at Home in His Ordinary World:*** Police Chief Martin Brody is new to the town of Amity, an island township. Brody has a fear of water, a fear of drowning. As a new resident who moved from New York to accept the job, Brody is also an outsider who does not yet belong.

2. ***Call to Adventure #1:*** A young woman, Chrissie, is pulled underwater to her death during a moonlit swim. Brody is called to the scene.

3. ***Call to Adventure #2:*** Chrissie's remains confirm her death by a shark attack. Brody closes the beaches.

4. ***Refusal of the Call:*** Mayor Vaughn keeps the beaches open getting the medical examiner to recant his findings.

5. ***Call to Adventure #3 and Crossing the Threshold:*** Brody witnesses the shark death of Alex Kintner. He closes beaches, but the mayor reduces closure to twenty-four hours.

6. ***Allies, Mentors, Enemies:*** Enemies: the shark, Mayor Vaughn. Ally: Quint, a shark hunter, who offers to kill the shark for more than the three thousand dollar bounty, an offer the mayor "takes under advisement;" Ally and Mentor: Matt Hooper, a shark specialist, who confirms Chrissie's cause of death as a shark attack.

7. ***Road of Tests and Trials:*** Brody must police waters that are now jammed with fishermen fighting for the bounty. Hooper advises a test of digestive tract of huge tiger shark fishermen catch, but Mayor Vaughn blocks the test, even though the bite radius is too small.

   By night, Brody and Hooper clandestinely cut open the shark and confirm the real predator still lives and threatens more lives. Hooper gets Brody drunk enough to patrol the waters where they discover a wrecked fishing boat. While Hooper dives into the waters, he finds a huge tooth of a Great White in the hull of the ship, only to drop it when he sights the fisherman's corpse.

   Certain of the enemy, Brody and Hooper plead with the mayor to close the beaches. Without proof, he refuses. On the Fourth of July, the shark kills a fisherman and

Brody's eldest son is saved just in time. Brody is able to force the mayor to hire Quint. Quint and Hooper, adversaries, join Brody to hunt the shark. The men overcome their rivalry when the Great White lunges at Brody and escapes a harpoon shot. Eventually, the men shoot the shark and fasten ropes to its cleats, only to have it drag them farther out to sea, where the cleats rip free, and the shark chases them.

8. ***The Inmost Cave:*** Quint leads the shark inland, but in trying to outrun the fish, the engines fail. Armed with a strychnine-laced harpoon, Hooper dives, fails, and narrowly escapes the shark's jaws. The men are now defenseless.

9. ***The Ordeal—The Life and Death Struggle:*** The shark begins smashing the boat. Brody narrowly escapes sliding into its jaws, but Quint is not so lucky and dies. As the boat sinks, Brody is trapped in the cabin when the shark attacks. He shoves one of Hooper's air tanks into the shark's maw and escapes to the cabin. Armed with a rifle, Brody climbs the mast to the crow's nest, fires at the shark, finally striking the air tank, which explodes, killing the shark.

10. ***Refusal of the Return and the Return:*** Hooper surfaces alive and the two men pause to reflect on Quint's death and the ordeal.

11. ***The Ultimate Test—Resurrection:*** Having conquered his fear of water, Brody swims back to shore with Hooper.

12. ***Master of Two Worlds—The Elixir:*** Successful in killing the predator, Brody returns safety to the community where he is now a hero, and free of his fear of water, he is now like everyone else who loves living on the water. The elixirs are community safety and life.

When, Why, and How to Vary the Steps

The Call to Adventure *can be* the same as the traditional term, "inciting incident." Occasionally, a story will have an inciting incident that "upsets the apple cart" of the hero's ordinary life, but another event will introduce the story problem, which calls the hero to the adventure of solving it.

Notice in *Jaws* how the Call to Adventure is repeated three times, if you also count Brody's witnessing of Alex Kintner's death, which prompts him to Cross the Threshold into the Special World. Repeated "calls" raise suspense. Often, a second call is accompanied by "elimination of an expendable person or circumstance." Death of a character not only raises the stakes, it deepens the readers' empathy and identification with the protagonist.

There is no rule for how many times a writer should repeat the Call to Adventure. Nor is there a rule for how much development this beginning stage, Act I, should take. The final decision is usually a matter of a compromise between the writer's vision and the demands of the genre. Obviously, a horror novel like *Jaws* has different conventions from an historical epic like *The Thornbirds* or *Shōgun*. It's always wise to read the type of book you most wish to emulate.

Refusal of the Call to Adventure serves another function besides raising tension and suspense. This step corresponds to human nature. Few people will instantly or easily leave their ordinary lives to respond to change. Most people resist change. Some of us require a boot in the backside before we accept the challenges that we must face.

Death of a character not only raises the stakes, it deepens the readers' empathy and identification with the protagonist.

Usually, Meeting the Mentor occurs prior to Crossing the Threshold and serves several purposes. First, the mentor gives the final push to the reluctant protagonist so that he overcomes his refusal of the call. Now he will commit to the journey. He will accept the challenge and pursue the

story goal, and he will resolve the external problem introduced by the inciting incident.

When a protagonist enters the Special World in any story, he or she becomes "a fish out of water."

Second, the mentor can "mouth" the promise or theme of your story. In other words, what Police Chief Brody most yearns for is to belong to his new community. Yet his inner problem, his fear of water, prevents him from belonging and must be overcome before he can have his yearning fulfilled. When Hooper gets Brody drunk enough to overcome his fear of the water and begin patrolling the beaches from the water, he has, in effect, pushed Brody over the threshold into the Special World of the enemy, i.e., into the ocean.

Many novels and short stories begin with the Call to Adventure instead of with the Hero at Home. This permits a more exciting hook because it plunges the characters into what is termed *in media res*, into the middle of the mattering moment. Later, in chapter seven, we'll discuss hooks, the different ways you can begin a story.

The Special World of *Jaws* is the ocean. Not only is the sea out of Brody's comfort zone, but he fears drowning in it. When a protagonist enters the Special World in any story, he or she becomes "a fish out of water." In a romance, when a woman accompanies the hero on a first date, she leaves her comfort zone and enters the Special World of his company. A fighter pilot in a military thriller who enters enemy territory to drop bombs, has entered the Special World. When a sleuth begins a murder investigation, he or she enters the Special World of the crime and the perpetrator.

The idea behind the Approach to the Inmost Cave is that the hero, with his or her allies and mentors, prepares for a fight against the adversary. Call this "strategic planning" and getting the equipment ready. The Inmost Cave represents the enemy's lair, the most dangerous place in the story, where the hero chances failure. The Inmost Cave corresponds to the idea of "the darkest hour." It includes events where the forces of opposition are so great that it really looks as if the quest is doomed. This step in the Hero's Journey is a great

opportunity to reveal the origin of your protagonist's fear and weakness. You can show him or her coming to grips with them enough to mitigate their negative effect and to mount the final assault against the enemy. You can answer the questions, "Why am I here?" and "What the hell am I going to do now?"

The Ordeal is the climax of a story that culminates with success or failure. Either the protagonist reaches the story goal and resolves the problem introduced by the inciting incident or Call to Adventure, or it is obvious that he will never do so. This finishes the quest of the external story, the plot, but it does not finish the inner story.

Refusal of the Return is as much a step that recognizes human nature as Refusal of the Call to Adventure. Having finally and heroically succeeded at reaching the external story goal, the protagonist pauses to celebrate the moment of triumph. The last thing most of us want to do while basking in triumph is hurry back to face the problems of our ordinary lives. Also, this refusal represents a psychological resistance to character transformation, a transformation that is necessary if the ending is truly a "good ending" that demonstrates growth. Keep the Refusal of the Return short, because after the hero reaches the climax and his story goal, everything that follows the climax of a story chances becoming "anticlimactic."

The Ultimate Test—Resurrection refers to a test of inner character change. Most stories introduce one final challenge. This test determines whether the protagonist will act in the same way he did at the story beginning, still afflicted with his weakness and/or fear. Or, this test allows the protagonist to demonstrate, for the first time, that he has fully overcome his weakness and thereby reconciled the past trauma that created it. In *Jaws*, we don't know why Police Chief Brody fears drowning, but he must drown or swim when the ship and shark are destroyed. Earlier, when Hooper, Brody's mentor, got him drunk to overcome his fear, it wasn't a matter of Brody's own choosing. Now, Brody must decide. Because he does make the choice to swim, he is reborn into a new person who is free of his fear of drowning.

When the protagonist passes the Ultimate Test and is resurrected into a new self that is freed of the traumatic past and his weakness or

CRAFT BOOKS ON THE HERO'S JOURNEY

***The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, by Joseph Campbell**

***The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, by Christopher Vogler**

***Myth and the Movies: Discovering the Mythic Structure of 50 Unforgettable Films*, by Stuart Voytilla**

***The Heroine's Journey: Woman's Quest for Wholeness*, by Maureen Murdock**

***The Keys: How to Write Damn Good Fiction Using the Power of Myth*, by James N. Frey**

fear, that character is said to be Master of Two Worlds. The two worlds are the former, psychologically wounded self and the new, healed and integrated self. Also, the protagonist is no longer a fish out of water. The Special World has become as comfortable as the Ordinary World and he can enjoy being a master of the new and old domain.

Success is rewarded, usually with a short scene of acknowledgement of the hero's success. Campbell referred to boons, elixirs, and treasures. The late writing teacher and novelist Gary Provost, referred to the reward as "the prize." Christopher Vogler talks about the hero returning to his community and sharing the elixir with them, thus enriching the community with knowledge and sometimes, too, with physical representations of the heroic journey's success. An engagement or wedding ring is often the prize in romances. The sacred amulet is returned to its rightful clan in a fantasy. You can be creative and craft elixirs and treasures, both intangible and tangible, to represent your protagonist's inner and outer success.

The Heroine's Journey

As a teacher of novel craft, I began to squirm over the novels that did not seem to fit the Hero's Journey. I felt like a lone voice in the wind when, in my literary community, I publicly suggested that a heroine's journey might have different steps that better fit some of our women's fiction, especially some of the "Oprah books."

I was only fifteen years behind psychologist Carol S. Pearson's work, inspired by Campbell, including her two books, *The Hero Within* and *Exploring the Hero Within.* She asserted the existence of a heroine's journey that better matched the unique experience of women. I was only ten years behind the publication of *The Heroine's Journey*, by Maureen Murdock, which has remained the primary reference on the subject. For writers who are not accustomed to the language of mythological studies or Jungian psychology, know that both journey descriptions rely on metaphoric or symbolic interpretations, not literal. Therefore, words such as *feminine* and *masculine* are defined in psychological ways, meaning the inner receptive and inner dynamic aspects of self and not as adjectives in the vernacular to mean the way a woman or man acts and appears. According to Murdock:

> The descent is characterized as a journey to the underworld. . . . It is usually precipitated by a life-changing loss. Experiencing the death of one's child, parent, or spouse with whom one's life and identity have been closely intertwined may mark the beginning of the journey to the underworld. . . . A woman moves down into the depths to reclaim the parts of herself that split off when she rejected the mother and shattered the mirror of the feminine. . . . When a woman makes her descent, she may feel stripped bare, dismembered, or devoured by rage. She experiences a loss of identity, a falling away of the perimeters of a known role, and the fear that accompanies loss. . . . Every time a woman makes the de-

scent, she fears the dark goddess and what this part of her self will do to her.

Map 3–2 offers the steps in the Heroine's Journey as outlined by Maureen Murdock. Even though they are presented in a numerical order, as if they are consecutive, Murdock suggests that they might be better represented on a wheel. Once again, the structure is meant to offer a guideline not an unbending rule.

My own experience and reading lead me to believe that women often pursue personal growth in different ways from men. For one thing, women may seek help and support of other women—and men—to resolve their problems. We don't have to "fight the dragon and kill it" all by ourselves. Sometimes, we invite the dragon to join our women's groups and thus neutralize its ferocity. Other times, we walk away from problems and find some other approach or wait for a later time. Women more often than men cultivate a network of supportive others to help them. When we achieve our goals, we certainly don't "win the fair maiden" as our reward. Often, winning means inner growth rather than outer achievement.

In fact, many novels of women's fiction, both mainstream and literary, seem to display an inner journey as a story arc much more clearly than an outer journey. The inner defines the story purpose. Alice, Jane Hamilton's protagonist in *A Map of the World*, seems to descend into a personal hell where she faces herself and her demons and seeks personal redemption for her tragic mistake of negligence that cost the life of Lizzy, her friend's little girl. Likewise, in Elizabeth Berg's *Open House*, Samantha must emerge from grief to remember and reclaim the self from prior to being a wife, before she can learn how to make her own happiness. The focus of these stories is on the inner, psychological dimension and not on an external quest with villains, weaponry, and a victory march.

Until recently, few writers have known the steps of the Heroine's Journey to consider selecting it as the map for their stories. The question remains: Does the outline of the Heroine's Journey correspond

MAP 3-2

Maureen Murdock's Heroine's Journey

(based on *The Heroine's Journey: Woman's Quest for Wholeness* by Maureen Murdock)

Note: Capitalized words refer to their meaning as Jungian-based archetypes.

1. *Separation from the Feminine*
   A woman searches for an identity in a Masculine-defined culture. She rejects the definition of the Feminine as personified by her mother.

2. *Identification with the Masculine*
   Lacking a positive Masculine ally, men in the role of the Father become the woman's ally. She adopts and emulates the role and becomes addicted to perfection, then realizing the false identification with the Masculine as defined by the culture, she puts the patriarchy on notice.

3. *The Road of Trials*
   She challenges the myths of female inferiority, dependency, and romantic love.

4. *The Illusory Boon of Success*
   She feels as if she has lost herself in her struggle for achievement.

5. *Strong Women Say No*
   She feels spiritually arid, as if betrayed by God, and knows that symbolically, "the king must die."

6. *The Initiation and Descent to the Goddess*
   This step defines a period of drawing inward and looking for the lost pieces of herself.

MAP 3-2

Continued

7. *Urgent Yearning to Reconnect with the Feminine*
   Bereft, grieving the separation of the Feminine, she refines herself as a vessel that can receive and express the Feminine.

8. *Healing the Mother/Daughter Split*
   She reclaims the power of the Feminine as it fills her from within, healing the schism between the Mother and the Daughter.

9. *Finding the Inner Man with Heart*
   She integrates and heals the wounded parts of her inner Masculine.

10. *Beyond Duality*
    The Sacred Marriage occurs as she learns to integrate and balance all aspects of herself.

to some, if not many, novels of women's fiction, both mainstream and literary works? Time will tell whether the quest for human growth is different according to gender. Or we may be evolving toward delineating an archetypal journey that is a blend of both, something I would name "the Human Journey."

AT the heart of memorable fiction of any length is character. An old adage states, "A child is not raised in a day." Neither is a believable character created by filling in lists or worksheets. We'll revisit characterization in chapters six and seven, adding depth and complexity to match the demands of story and plot.

FIVE

First Steps

Is there anything *as horrible as* starting *a trip? Once you're off, that's all right, but the last moments are earthquake and convulsion, and the feeling that you are a snail being pulled off your rock.*

Ann Morrow Lindbergh

MOST FICTION WRITERS fret over the beginnings of their stories—with good cause. You must hook the reader's attention, put them under your spell, and make them suspend disbelief in the fictional world. You must introduce a character in conflict, not only with forces in the environment but also with internal forces in the psychological environment. If you begin your story too late in the chronology, you face telling the reader too much background. And you must pick the correct point of entry. If you begin the story too early, you ask the reader to endure less essential events before you get to the "mattering moment." These considerations are but a few of your decisions about the beginning.

Nearly every novelist I've worked with revises the beginning more than any other part of the novel. Expect to revise, and revise again, perhaps writing a number of beginnings before you find the best one.

Narrative Hooks

You must create suspense, which comes from making your reader ask questions and wait for answers that come accompanied by yet more questions. Reader curiosity equals dramatic suspense, which varies in intensity according to the emotions you generate through your writing. Your job is to maintain that suspense from the first word of your story to the last, whether your story is short or a multigenerational epic.

The "hook" may be one line or a paragraph or two, but the purpose is the same. A narrative hook can frame an entire story. If it raises questions about the plot, it will pull the reader into the story for awhile, but if it raises questions about a universal need that fuels the protagonist's yearning, it is likely to pull the reader in at the deepest levels possible.

Why do the beginnings of J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter books win us over so quickly? They all show Harry in conflict with the allegedly normal Dursleys. Every child struggles with feeling "not normal," and every adult remembers, if indeed we ever got past, feeling as if we were outside the "in" crowd. Rowling struck on a universal need that hooks us heart, soul, and sinker.

Take the beginning of Pat Conroy's *The Prince of Tides*: "My wound is geography." This is an "off the nose" hook; its meaning is indirect, sophisticated in its subtlety. "Wound" telegraphs that the book is going to be about healing, and isn't the need for emotional healing universal? "Geography" is the evocative word, raising questions and pulling the reader into the next line, and the next, to learn what the narrator means.

Jane Hamilton's narrative lead in *A Map of the World* hooks her readers based not only on fine literary writing, but on the deeper level of the narrator's need for self-forgiveness and redemption. The yearning for this universal need becomes the story promise. Here is her lead:

I used to think if you fell from grace it was more likely than not the result of one stupendous error, or else an unfortunate accident.

Try your hand at penning a hook that reflects, overtly or covertly, your protagonist's story yearning.

If you have fallen from grace, then you *need* redemption. The reader knows from the first sentence, even if the knowing is not conscious, that this *story* is about redemption. The *plot* involves what happens to the protagonist when a child in her care drowns as a result of her neglect.

Take time to generate many possible narrative hooks for your stories. Make sure that each line in the hook generates questions. Try your hand at penning a hook that reflects, overtly or covertly, your protagonist's story yearning.

Questions spring from plot and from characterization. Look at the one-line or short hooks in Map 5-1, and decide what questions they raise and whether the questions originate in plot or characterization.

To bring clarity to confusion and help you find your best start, journalism offers fiction writers a handy device, the "five Ws" (who, what, where, when, why) and the lone "H" (how).

Who

Who should open your story? This is an important decision and it can be a difficult decision. Your choices include the omniscient author, the protagonist, the antagonist, or another character. Each choice carries consequences.

OMNISCIENT

Many novels open with the godlike omniscient viewpoint, then narrow to one character's subjective viewpoint before the first page or chapter is done. A classic example is John Steinbeck's *The Pearl.* It be-

MAP 5-1

Narrative Hooks

As you read each hook, determine what questions the author raises and whether they originate in plot or story, i.e., events or characterization. Do any of them allude to a character's deepest yearning? Do any reveal the novel's potential theme?

It was time to seek the vision.
The Lion's Lady, by Julie Garwood

The first time I met Karen Nichols, she struck me as the kind of woman who ironed her socks.
Prayers for Rain, by Dennis Lehane

The day I walked out of court, I didn't have anything more in mind than getting the hell away from Bastrop County, and quick. One minute the jury was acquitting me of Willie Griffin's murder, and the next I was hot-footing out of there.
Looking After Lily, by Cindy Bonner

Query: would it be a serious breach of etiquette to run out on my own wedding? That was the question I asked myself as I put a leg over the window ledge of my parents' bathroom, grimly regarding the ten-foot drop into the putrid metallic depth of the dustbins below.
Altar Ego, by Kathy Lette

The worst night of my life? My first—and last—date with Angela O'Bannon.
Son of the Mob, by Gordon Korman

The tendrils of memory curl, twist, and tighten around all she knows, all she could possibly know and much she could not. She knows things in her bones, young Zerelda Cole.
Mamaw, by Susan Dodd

Continued

I did not realize for a long time that I was dead.
Possessing the Secret of Joy, by Alice Walker

I have to let this story go. It is with me all the time now, a terrible weight.
The Weight of Water, by Anita Shreve

They're all dead now.
Fall on Your Knees, by Ann-Marie MacDonald

It was a pleasure to burn.
Fahrenheit 451, by Ray Bradbury

There was death at its beginning as there would be death again at its end.
The Horse Whisperer, by Nicholas Evans

There are some men who enter a woman's life and screw it up forever. Joseph Morelli did this to me—not forever, but periodically.
One for the Money, by Janet Evanovich

The day Kevin Tucker nearly killed her, Molly Somerville swore off unrequited love forever.
This Heart of Mine, by Susan Elizabeth Phillips

It is stunning how quickly it happens. How little time it takes to go from trouble to tragedy. Seconds. Mere seconds without air and the brain begins to shut down. No time to struggle. No time to panic even.
Dust to Dust, by Tami Hoag

gins with an overview of the geography surrounding the town of La Paz, gradually telescoping down to the third-person viewpoint of pearl diver Kino, the protagonist.

A "geographic" opening, which I think of as "the Michener," carries great risk for a novice. Rarely can an omniscient description of setting be so compellingly written as to supply all the demands of an effective hook. It takes a highly skilled writer with outstanding command, a writer like N. Scott Momaday in his omniscient and geographic opening in the prologue and in a portion of the opening of chapter one in *House Made of Dawn.*

Prologue

> *Dypaloh.* There was a house made of dawn. It was made of pollen and rain, and the land was very old and everlasting. There were many colors on the hills, and the plain was bright with different-colored clays and sands. Red and blue and spotted horses gazed in the plain, and there was a dark wilderness on the mountains beyond. The land was still and strong. It was beautiful all around.

Chapter One

> The river lies in a valley of hills and fields. The north end of the valley is narrow, and the river runs down from the mountains through a canyon. The sun strikes the canyon floor only a few hours each day, and in winter the snow remains for a long time in the crevices of the walls. . . .

An omniscient opening of geography and setting can work for an historical novel or story, orienting the reader to time and place. Similarly, science fiction or fantasy stories may use an omniscient opening to orient the reader to the imaginary time, place, and perhaps alien culture. These openings must hook reader attention and cannot just be a catalogue listing or report.

In the final determination, consider opening your story in the

omniscient viewpoint only if your writing is compelling and you have a strong argument why you need this most difficult of all ways to pull readers into your story.

Readers are ready to care for a character, or several characters, who are locked in conflict and who desperately seek a worthy goal.

PROTAGONIST

Most short stories and a majority of novels begin in the viewpoint of the protagonist. Not only are readers working to gain orientation in the story time and location, they are most likely to "bond" with a story's *first* point-of-view character. It's as if readers are eager to settle in and need the security of answers to the fundamental questions of every story: Who is the main character? Where and when does the story take place? What's at stake? and, How will the protagonist pursue the story goal? Readers are ready to care for a character, or several characters, who are locked in conflict and who desperately seek a worthy goal. If readers misperceive a character as the protagonist, only to discover in chapter two that they were wrong, they have to stop and reorder all of their assumptions and answers. The writer may lose the reader as a result.

Notice how effectively Michael Connelly captures his reader in the beginning of his thriller, *The Poet*:

> Death is my beat. I make my living from it. I forge my professional reputation on it. I treat it with the passion and precision of an undertaker—somber and sympathetic about it when I'm with the bereaved, a skilled craftsman with it when I'm alone. I've always thought the secret of dealing with death was to keep it at arm's length. That's the rule. Don't let it breathe in your face.
>
> But my rule didn't protect me. . . .

A first-person protagonist secures reader attention through the intensity of voice and the intimacy of the viewpoint. Whether you choose a first-person or a third-person viewpoint, you're usually on solid ground if you begin your story with your protagonist.

ANTAGONIST

Some genres of fiction effectively begin with an inciting incident, usually a crime, relayed in the viewpoint of an antagonist. Thrillers—legal, medical, techno, political—may start with a crime or misdeed, either in a prologue or in chapter one. Some mysteries and horror stories also begin with the twisted thoughts, feelings, and sensations of the antagonist, which serve to let the reader measure the danger of the threat. The initial viewpoint of an antagonist may never again appear in a novel, or it may be the first of a developed point of view for a villain. *The Hunt for Red October*, by Tom Clancy, opens in the viewpoint of Marko Ramius, Soviet submarine captain. Notice how Clancy establishes setting and reinforces the season reflected in the chapter tag line, "The First Day, Friday, 3 December."

> *The Red October*
> Captain First Rank Marko Ramius of the Soviet Navy was dressed for the Arctic conditions normal to the Northern Fleet submarine base at Polyarnyy. Five layers of wool and oilskin enclosed him. A dirty harbor tug pushed his submarine's bow around to the north, facing down the channel. The dock that had held his *Red October* for two interminable months was now a water-filled concrete box, one of the many specially built to shelter strategic missile submarines from the harsh elements. On its edge a collection of sailors and dockyard workers watched his ship sail in stolid Russian fashion, without a wave or cheer.

The antagonist viewpoint is not frequently used, so take care if you decide to begin your story with it. The more a reader gets to know a character, the more likely they are to develop some empathy for him. Because a viewpoint reveals a character's thoughts, feelings, and sensations, you can't pull punches and hide information and motives that would be natural to share.

ANOTHER CHARACTER

Some novels begin with a minor viewpoint character or with a narrator who is not the protagonist, such as Nick's point of view in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Mysteries sometimes begin with the victim's point of view for one very good reason: Readers get to know the victim while alive to care that the criminal is apprehended after he or she is murdered. Novels that span large periods of time often begin in a character's viewpoint other than the protagonist and then jump-cut in time and viewpoint thereafter.

After an omniscient prologue set in A.D. 1533, Clive Cussler begins chapter one of his thriller, *Inca Gold*, in a point of view other than protagonist Dirk Pitt, his famous special projects director for the U.S. National Underwater and Marine Agency (NUMA):

> March 1, 1578
> West Coast of Peru
> Captain Juan de Anton, a brooding man with Castilian green eyes and a precisely trimmed black beard, peered through his spyglass at the strange ship following in his wake and raised his eyebrows in mild surprise. A chance encounter, he wondered, or a planned interception?

Notice how immediately engaging this viewpoint is. In one paragraph, I can become Captain Juan de Anton, and as a reader, my suspense is high. I want to know the answer to his questions.

HOW MANY CHARACTERS?

If writing a short story, limit your number of viewpoint characters in your introductory scene to *one*, your protagonist. For short stories and novels, limit the on-stage characters in the first scene to two, but no more than three, named characters. I refer to "named" characters, because you may need other characters that are known by their roles, i.e., the car attendant, the waitress. When you create a scene with just

one character, you are forced to tell (narrate) rather than show (via scenes), because of the reader's need to be briefed on what has happened, what the character plans, and what the problem is.

Two or three named characters offer you the opportunity to create dialogue, action, conflict, and chemistry. If you introduce more than three characters, however, you risk reader confusion trying to keep them straight, and you create a logistical problem. You have to keep every one of the four (or more) characters present in the scene and performing essential roles; they can't just be props.

As with every choice you make in writing fiction, do your best to select *who* opens your story or novel based upon a combination of what the story and genre demand as well as upon your intuitive sense of the best viewpoint. Know, too, that your "safest" viewpoint, meaning the least confusing and potentially strongest, will be your protagonist's.

What

"What" refers to the focus of your beginning, the issue that presents the best opening. Ask yourself, what is the core story problem that only your hero can resolve? What's at stake? What could be lost or gained? In *Jaws*, discussed in detail in chapter three, the problem is shark attacks. What's at stake is loss of lives and secondarily, loss of tourist revenue to the coastal town. What's a good place to begin? Either with the discovery of a body or in the middle of the attack that ends with the victim being killed. The first option introduces the protagonist. The second option necessitates an omniscient viewpoint or a one-time viewpoint of the victim.

When you create a scene with just one character, you are forced to tell rather than show.

In *Light in Shadow*, the romantic suspense novel by Jayne Ann Krentz, which I discuss in chapter eight, the story opens in media res, in the middle of the protagonist doing her ordinary job as an interior decorator, but

at the "mattering moment." Zoe has just psychically picked up the screaming agony of her client's ex-wife in the bedroom where she was murdered. In both of these examples, a change in the ordinary day of the characters brings an event that cannot be ignored; the stakes are too great. The external environment drops a problem in the lap of the protagonist.

The late teacher and novelist Jack H. Bickham suggested a way of finding a beginning based on the inner character dimension. He posited that every character has a self-definition that when placed in jeopardy would give a great starting point. For instance, if a man sees himself, above all other definitions, as an honorable man, a situation where he looked dishonorable would make a great, character-in-conflict opener.

In *Jaws*, Police Chief Martin Brody sees himself as an excellent law enforcement officer worthy of respect. As the outsider from New York, he needs approval and acceptance by the citizens of this small town. His secret is his fear of water, of drowning. A good place to begin, for the inner character story, is having an incident where the investigation will take him into the water and threaten his acceptance into this new community. Hmm. How about a shark attack that kills a young girl! Good idea!

In *Light in Shadow*, Zoe has assumed a new identity and is hiding in the small town until she can figure out how to avenge her husband's murder. A wealthy man—her client—getting away with the murder of his wife threatens Zoe's self-definition. She cannot live with herself if she were to look the other way.

Determine what outer plot events will set in motion the need for your protagonist to resolve a story problem. These events will define your inciting incident. Also determine what event would most question or threaten your protagonist's self-definition. Cross-reference these two, the external event and the inner need, and you will have a good probability of starting well.

Where

As you might have noticed in each of the beginnings used in the prior examples, setting is an important part of nearly every one. Give considerable thought to where you start your stories. If they take place in a foreign country or different era, the reader will need orientation. You will have the added burden of transporting your reader, as if on a magic carpet, to a place different from what they usually call "reality."

One of the great delights for a reader is the vicarious experience of being "out of time and place," an armchair traveler. Equally important is being able to establish opening settings that are not Michener-like in their large scope or ponderous with narration. Consider how Scottsman Alexander McCall Smith handles the problem of "where" as he opens *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*:

> Mma Ramotswe had a detective agency in Africa, at the foot of Kgale Hill. These were its assets: a tiny white van, two desks, two chairs, a telephone, and an old typewriter. Then there was a teapot, in which Mma Ramotswe—the only lady private detective in Botswana—brewed redbush tea. And three mugs—one for herself, one for her secretary, and one for the client. . . .

Smith continues to draw the reader into the setting, from inside the agency office looking out, as follows:

> To the front, an acacia tree, the thorn tree which dots the wide edges of the Kalahari; the great white thorns, a warning; the olive-grey leaves, by contrast so delicate. In its branches, . . . one might see a Go-Away-Bird, or hear it, rather. And beyond the acacia, over the dusty road, the roofs of the town under a cover of trees and scrub bush; on the horizon, in a blue shimmer of heat, the hills, like improbable, overgrown termite mounds.

Not only does he locate the reader firmly in a place they have likely never been, he also establishes a mood. His presentation of setting is *atmospheric.*

Everything at the beginning of a story, especially a novel and especially paragraph one and page one, should be considered as if under a magnifying glass.

In novels other than ones set in unfamiliar locales, your choice of setting and how you handle it is equally important. Everything at the beginning of a story, especially a novel and especially paragraph one and page one, should be considered as if under a magnifying glass. It takes on extra significance in symbolizing and foreshadowing the entire story. Nothing can be tossed in unconsciously. You should select your setting to build characterization and to represent the type of novel or the theme.

Author Charles Frazier offers a terrific example of making use of the setting to foreshadow and symbolize his story in *Cold Mountain*:

> At first gesture of morning, flies began stirring. Inman's eyes and the long wound at his neck drew them and the sound of their wings and the touch of their feet were soon more potent than a yardful of roosters in rousing a man to wake. So he came to yet one more day in the hospital ward. He flapped the flies away with his hands and looked across the foot of his bed to an open triple-hung window. . . .
>
> . . . So he rose and dressed and sat in a ladderback chair, putting the gloomy room of beds and their broken occupants behind him. He flapped again at the flies and looked out the window at the first smear of foggy dawn and waited for the world to begin shaping up outside.
>
> The window was tall as a door, and he imagined many times that it would open onto some other place and let him walk through and be there.

Frazier mentions the window in most of the paragraphs in the first *eight* pages of his novel. Inman, his wounded soldier, relates how the window becomes the "frame" to his inner sight as he reflects upon the past and his outer sight, considers the future, and also watches a blind

man with a cart, who sells boiled peanuts and newspapers to passersby outside the hospital. The "window," is a potent symbol for the portal between one reality and another and for the veil between life and death (Inman is expected to die of his wound). It foreshadows the entire novel and Inman's journey to his physical and spiritual home.

Much can be made of the flies, the blind man, and of Inman's wound, as symbols for the story. In terms of a novel beginning, Frazier had the option to begin Inman's story at the moment of his injury or at the moment he leaves to hospital to begin his walk home. Yet, he begins the novel in the relatively inert setting of a death ward. He begins with a portal, the window, just prior to Inman making a decision.

When

Finding where along the continuum of time to begin your story is a particularly difficult decision. I recommend making a time line of your protagonist's life relative to the events of your story. For instance, you should have created a backstory with at least one incident that left its mark on your protagonist's psyche. This wound should relate directly to your character's weakness and to an unmet need that is the spine of the story.

In some novels, the traumatic event happened in an adult protagonist's long-ago childhood. In *The Abyss*, by Orson Scott Card, when his protagonist, Bud, was a young boy, he watched his brother drown. Should he start his book with this incident? Card does re-create this traumatic incident in a flashback that fills one entire chapter, but he does not begin the novel with it. Chapter one opens in Bud's adulthood as he faces a life-and-death crisis undersea.

Generally speaking, avoid beginning your book with an adult protagonist's childhood. At the worst, the reader may mistake the story as one written for young readers. At the best, the reader may assume the "what" of the plot is about this past event. If an author

finds it necessary to begin with childhood, some authors have managed the problem by starting with the adult character but quickly making the transition to the childhood past.

Arthur Golden begins *Memoirs of a Geisha* with his adult, first-person narrator Sayuri having tea with *the reader* and setting up how she became a geisha. After a hiatus on the second page, the novel begins with her childhood and continues to the day she met Mr. Tanaka Ichiro and from there, chronologically through her adult years as a geisha.

Even if you locate the traumatic past event in the near past, avoid beginning any story in the midst of a flashback. In fact, avoid a fully developed flashback in your first chapter and maybe even in your first few chapters. A flashback can impede your story's forward momentum. Beginnings resemble old steam-powered trains leaving a station, gradually picking up speed. A flashback not only posts a red light, time to put on the brakes, but it actually sends the signal to move in reverse. Flashbacks too early annoy readers; flashbacks later on can fill in missing information and supply character depth. In the story beginning, the reader doesn't care enough about any character to want to know his or her past. Later on, the reader craves deeper knowledge of the character in whom they have invested so fully.

Most stories begin in the present, either in media res, in the middle of an event that creates the problem that defines the story, or just prior to this event. If you open prior to the inciting incident, using what I call a "quiet" beginning, i.e., the Hero at Home in the Hero's Journey, you face greater pressure to hook the reader. In other words, your writing must stand out! You can create every bit as compelling a beginning in a quiet beginning if you craft a scene, not a sequel (covered in chapter eight). Put more than one character on stage in action and implied conflict, and foreshadow the deeper issues of your novel.

Flashbacks too early annoy readers; flashbacks later on can fill in missing information and supply character depth.

In contrast, when you open in media res, in the middle of the Call to Adventure in the Hero's Journey, the

inciting incident itself will usually create drama and suspense if not danger and excitement. If you pull out all the stops and write the equivalent of your character jumping out of a plane with a parachute that won't open, while enemy parachuters from another plane use your character as target practice, you will definitely hook your reader. But for how long? The consequence of opening with a "Stallone" beginning, as in Sylvester Stallone's beginning of the movie *Cliffhanger*, is that everything else that follows may be anticlimactic. In most cases, a moderately dramatic inciting incident will suffice.

If you begin a story in present time, one way to decide between a quiet beginning and one in media res is to read extensively the kind of book you wish to write. You'll begin to see patterns that correspond with your genre.

It's perfectly acceptable to provide the reader with a dateline at the beginning of chapter one and for subsequent chapters should you wish to do so. A dateline and, if you wish, a location tag, can quickly help to orient the reader, as Tom Clancy did in the example on page 72.

Why

The question "Why?" gets at the heart of your story's meaning and can signal where best to open it. For instance, if your protagonist is a kid who doesn't fit in with his peers, perhaps because he is "geeky" or has some behavior that sets him apart, then the meaning of your story is about belonging. You could open your story with your character's birthday, an occasion that has never been recognized with as little as a birthday card. Show how his step-family and friends react. Perhaps your story will begin as follows:

> Harry Potter was a highly unusual boy in many ways. For one thing, he hated the summer holidays more than any other time of year. For another, he really wanted to do his homework but was forced to do it in secret, in the dead of night. And he also happened to be a wizard.

This opening paragraph from J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* gets at Harry's deepest problem—belonging. During summers, he lives with his legal guardians, the dreadfully normal Dursley family, who we learn forbade him from doing his summer homework for wizard school.

The rest of the first chapter shows Harry defying the rules by doing his magic homework in the middle of the night, risking the possibility of discovery and punishment. But if he does not keep up, he risks losing ground—and social belonging—at Hogwarts. His owl returns accompanied by two other owls, each bearing gifts and Harry's first-ever birthday cards from his wizard friends. One troublesome gift, *The Monster Book of Monsters*, and an official note instructing him to secure his aunt and uncle's signature, set the stage for a scene goal and conflict in chapter two and beyond.

How

In terms of technique, how should you present the action you've chosen at a specific place and time from the point of view of a particular character? On the surface, you can begin with dialogue or narration. Similar to the beginnings already given here, most stories—short stories and novels—begin with narration. The reason for this is that dialogue causes the reader to work harder to become oriented. It's difficult to be certain of time, place, or character identity from dialogue alone. Notice the work you must do as you read the opening of *The Missing Chapter*, a Nero Wolfe mystery by Robert Goldsborough:

> "You're almost fifteen minutes early," I told the elegant-looking visitor who stood erect on our front stoop. "We don't deny admission on a technicality like that, though. And I've seen your picture in the newspapers—more than once. Come on in."
>
> "Thank you," Horace Vinson said with a smile, smoothing well-tended salt-and-pepper hair that had been ruffled by rude April

winds. "I thought the cab ride down here would take a lot longer. You, of course, are Archie Goodwin. I, too, have seen your picture in the papers. And I recognize your voice from yesterday."

I grinned back and held out a paw. "Guilty as charged."

In my opinion, this dialogue opening seems awkward. It feels as if the author needs to explain who these characters are, and yet, because the series is well established, it gives the author greater license. Beginning with dialogue can work very well in drawing the reader into the "mattering moment," as author Iris Johansen demonstrates in this opening of *The Search*:

"Get out of there, Sarah," Boyd yelled from outside the house. "That wall is going to tumble any minute."

"Monty's found something." Sarah carefully moved over to the pile of rubble where the golden retriever was standing. "Be still, boy. Be very still."

Within narration, you have a vast number of choices for how to begin. Because narration means telling, in contrast to a scene, which is showing, narration includes the following possibilities, each of which may offer you an effective story beginning:

- Exposition: backstory or flashback. Example: *Inca Gold*, by Clive Cussler, beginning with the "mysterious intruders" who arrived in A.D. 1533 on an island mountain.
- Characterization: physical description of self and others, emotions, motives, hopes, dreams, fears, motives, ideas, and relationships. Example: *Cold Mountain*, by Charles Frazier.
- Environment: specific settings—from locales to countries; scene settings—such as offices, homes, vehicles, and novel-specific settings; and nature—from flora and fauna to weather and seasons. Example: *Point of Impact*, by Stephen Hunter.

- Events: in the present, past, or future, related to the immediate plot or related to a larger and/or philosophical or political nature. Example: *The Lovely Bones*, by Alice Sebold.

Naturally, some of the finest fiction writers combine several forms of narration at once, such as Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones*:

> My name is Salmon, like the fish; first name, Susie. I was fourteen when I was murdered on December 6, 1973. In newspaper photos of missing girls from the seventies, most looked like me: white girls with mousy brown hair. This was before kids of all races and genders started appearing on milk cartons or in the daily mail. It was still back when people believed things like that didn't happen.

This superb narrative beginning shocks, engages, and fully orients the reader into this novel without sounding forced or contrived.

To Prologue or Not to Prologue

Some readers hate prologues and some love them. Some literary agents and editors feel the same way. How do you know if you need one? Here are some reasons in favor of using a prologue:

- to introduce a scene from the long-ago past or distant future that would otherwise seem too jolting in the continuity of the primary story
- to introduce a character and point of view that never again occurs in the primary story
- to provide critical information about history, politics, geography, or other reference material that the reader needs for understanding and that otherwise interrupts the storytelling

- to dramatize a critical event or offer a document that foreshadows and sets up the primary story

Sometimes writers include prologues when they should relocate the beginning of their stories in a different time that would eliminate the need for the prologue. The main disadvantage of a prologue is that you double your trouble: you must write two great opening scenes and hook your reader twice!

Even though you will find many published examples to the contrary, keep your prologues short, three to four manuscript pages at most. If you find that your prologue extends ten to twenty pages, reconsider whether it should really be chapter one.

What a prologue is not is an information dumping ground. You should not use a prologue to force feed character background, passive descriptions of setting, or a sterile listing of information.

The Rest of the Beginning

Once you write past your narrative hook or other lead, you face developing the rest of your first scene, and in the case of a novel, your first chapter followed by the rest of the story beginning. Sometimes a first chapter will contain nothing but one scene and in that way, the first chapter serves as a hook for the whole novel. If not, you have many choices. What is best will depend entirely on your story and the conventions of the type of book you are writing.

Map 5-2 provides a list of what *not* to do at a story beginning. In chapter eight, you'll learn the staging that goes into writing effective scenes, with all the shortcuts and tricks that allow you to create the most effective plots and write from the beginning to the middle to the end.

MAP 5-2

Do's and Don't's of Story Beginnings

Don't	Do
Avoid opening in a sequel.	Begin with a scene.
Avoid flashbacks.	Use flashbacks in the middle.
Limit exposition, description, and explanations.	Rely on action, dialogue, and conflict.
Avoid a flood of characters.	Keep the number of named characters to three or less.
Don't shift viewpoints.	Maintain one viewpoint per scene, sequel, or shortcut.
Don't begin in a dream or in the midst of travel.	Do begin in *media res*, in the middle of a mattering moment.
Avoid opening with one one character alone or in an inert setting such as sitting or thinking.	Put two or three characters on stage interacting, in action or conflict.
Limit adjectives and adverbs.	Raise questions and suspense.
Avoid coincidence and cliché.	Throw out your first ideas—stretch for originality.
Avoid passive, to-be verbs.	Use dynamic verbs, concrete nouns.
Don't use a mirror to describe a character	Weave in description to action.
Don't take rules as absolute.	Do break rules if you need to.

SIX

Deepening Your Characters

There are continents and seas in the moral worlds, to which every man is an isthmus or an inlet, yet unexplored by him, but that it is easier to sail many thousand miles through cold and storm and cannibals . . . than it is to explore the private sea, the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean of one's being alone.

Andrea Barrett, The Voyage of the Narwahl

AS AN INDEPENDENT book editor and writing teacher, I've been fascinated and alarmed by a nearly universal shortcoming of even the most well-written but not-yet-published novels: inadequate characterization, particularly of the protagonist. In fact, it is pure irony that the last character to emerge in detail and depth is usually the protagonist, the most important character of all.

Chapter two provided an introduction to building characterization, but in this chapter and the next one, you'll learn how to deepen your characters, to reach the ideal of creating characters that seem to live and breathe. This chapter will focus on creating a meaningful past, selecting a viewpoint, matching characters with twelve archetypes, and consciously seeing the connection between your characters—your offspring—and yourself.

Meaningful Past

Many years ago, I attended the wedding of a friend from graduate school. I thought I knew Sascha pretty well, but when the rabbi spoke about his past and the significance of his wedding, I was amazed. Sascha had been the first baby born to Russian Jews liberated from a concentration camp. He carried the hope of a free future and the continuation of family and faith. In that one moment, everything I had known about Sascha shifted. In that moment, I understood his drive and determination to become a movie director who would reach the masses with powerful messages about people struggling to make a difference.

Until you know a person's past, you cannot understand him or know what he cares about or what motivates him. Until you give your characters a past, the same thing is true. They will remain a mystery to the reader. In most cases, they come across as superficial and two-dimensional.

In real life, we have a host of meaningful events that have shaped who we are. In fiction, each character should have only one primary event that underlies character yearning, what choices are made under stress, and the story theme. Because suspense depends upon conflict and suffering, that past event must be a traumatic one—a loss, a betrayal, an insult, an injury, something that deeply wounded your character. This wound should create two or three specific outcomes:

- The wound should leave the character with a **need** so intense that he or she will be driven to fulfill it. These needs are universal, such as belonging, love, family, self-worth, or faith.
- The wound should leave the character with a **weakness**, a character flaw that seems out of the control or beyond the full awareness of the character.
- The wound may also gift the character with a heroic **strength** that increases his or her determination to fill the need and reach the plot goal.

Take for example *Cinderella.* Most of us probably don't remember, or perhaps never heard, one of the fuller versions of the story. In Grimm's version, Cinderella's mother falls ill. On her death bed, she promises that if Cinderella will be "good and pious," God will take care of her, and she, her mother, will always be with her.

Even when her father remarries a woman with two haughty daughters who abuse her, Cinderella continues to be good and pious. She visits her mother's grave three times a day, and her tears nourish a tree, out of which a white bird appears that will grant any of Cinderella's wishes. Although her two stepsisters are allowed to attend the three-night feast and dance, Cinderella is forbidden from going. Her stepmother tells her, "You cannot come with us, for you have no proper clothes and cannot dance, and you would put us to shame."

Cinderella goes to her mother's grave. The bird in the tree hears her plea and dresses her in gold and silver. After each evening of attending the ball as the prince's chosen partner, Cinderella eludes his attempts to find where she lives. On the last evening, she loses her golden shoe. The prince eventually tracks her down, only after her two stepsisters pursue the drastic measures of cutting off a toe in one case and part of a heel in the second case, hoping to fit the shoe and win the prince. When Cinderella slips on her missing shoe, the prince is able to look past her appearance and see her inner beauty. Later, during the bridal procession, the stepsisters are still hoping to curry favor, but the pigeons swoop down and peck out their eyes, blinding them for their "wickedness and falsehood."

DECONSTRUCTING CINDERELLA

Without knowing Cinderella's past, we cannot understand why this poor wretch bears the burden of mistreatment and injustice. But with insight into her past, we can identify, understand, and empathize with her need, strength, and weakness. We see that she is doing her best to be good and pious (the need), as she had promised her mother. Her choices and suffering now have context, even if a modern reader might interpret differently what behavior constitutes being "good and pious."

Because her father was rich, Cinderella would have qualified as a prospective bride for the prince, so there is no issue of her being from the wrong social class. Her trauma was the loss of her mother compounded by ongoing suffering due to her father's poor choice in remarriage. She also needs to find a place and people where she can once again belong.

Cinderella's strength is a heroic determination to keep her promise to her mother. Her weakness is less clear. The fairy tale fails to develop why she fled the prince on the three evenings and eluded his desire to see where she lived. Yet, her yearning, to be recognized for being good and pious, does seem to be fulfilled. Perhaps she had to run from the prince to test him, to find out if he, like her step-relations, would judge her based on appearances. The Grimm version omits quite a bit of motivation and character development, even though it supplies more than modern, sanitized versions.

From my twenty-first-century viewpoint, if I selected a weakness for Cinderella, it would be her inability to confront her father for his abandonment and neglect, which would have led to a quicker end to her mistreatment. Cinderella should worry that the prince will be just like Daddy and may one day neglect their children. She should get this straightened out before agreeing to matrimony.

A character weakness that fits with the Grimm's version is that because of her mother's death and subsequent poor treatment, Cinderella suffers insecurity and low self-esteem. She craves confirmation of her self-worth, a universal human need. If she did not suffer with a low estimation of her self, she would surely have asked the white bird at her mother's grave for relief from the tyranny. She could have confidently invited the prince back to her home and known that if he accepted her living circumstances, then he was the right one. If he recoiled at her station in life, she would value herself enough not to accept him.

Okay, so maybe I'm having a bit of tongue-in-cheek fun with this common fairy tale. I doubt the Brothers Grimm were consciously constructing a meaningful past for their heroine when they penned the story. However, I hope you see how selection of a different weak-

ness and yearning, based on the same past trauma, would create a different sense of character. Once you know a character's past and the weakness and strength that stem from it, you have a much more fully developed character.

Point of View

Point of view is the vantage point from which you tell your story. It is a writer's power tool for character depth—or lack of depth. For instance, a writer could have figured out a meaningful past with a clear need, weakness, and strength, but if the vantage point for letting the reader know this past is weak or distant, the characterization may still come across as superficial. Like the other tools of technique, point of view is more sophisticated and complex than it appears on the surface.

To begin with, point of view can be objective or subjective. If you decide to write a story from the **objective** point of view, you may offer the reader only what a camera would see and what sounds would be recorded. No smells, tastes, touch sensations, or interpretation of sounds or sights, and certainly no feelings or thoughts, all of which require a human being to report and interpret them. Here is an example of an objective point of view:

> The Border collie ran into the field, scattering the sea gulls, which took flight. He made a big circle and then, as the woman pointed at the ground, he returned to her side.

There is nothing wrong with these sentences. However, if you use the objective point of view for an entire story or novel, you limit yourself to writing that is painfully devoid of emotion or humanity. Writing in this point of view has, understandably, fallen from popularity. Even so, just

Like the other tools of technique, point of view is more sophisticated and complex than it appears on the surface.

about every story or novel contains some objective sentences that serve to move the action faster and cover "territory."

In contrast, the **subjective** point of view includes the full range of human perception and reaction or, in some fiction, the full range of nonhuman perception and reaction. For fun, I'll revise the above objective sentence into the subjective viewpoint of the dog, as follows:

> He sniffed the breeze. A salty, rich blend of feather and meat filled his snout. Birds. The loud birds. He flicked a glance at She, but his friend's nose did not twitch. He saw a flash of wing and ran, pulled grass under his front feet and pushed away with his back feet, again and again. Wind stroked and pressed his fur. He sucked giant gulps of air. There—bird! On white paw side. *I catch it.* He ran faster. It rose above him. He looked up, heard the thrump of wings beating air, squawks and screeches all around. He loped around the field. Birds gone. She would pat him, give him food. He saw his friend pointing at the dirt. Return.

This dog point-of-view paragraph is longer than the prior two sentences (partly the result of my having too much fun to stop earlier), but it is also the result of development. Objective point of view limits you to what is seen by a camera. Subjective frees you to use all of the physical senses and to provide inner thoughts and emotions. Even if my second example had been half as long, which example has deeper characterization? Subjective point of view always offers more development than objective point of view.

If only point-of-view choices were as simple as objective or subjective. However, within subjective, writers face a smorgasbord of selections—from first person at one extreme to omniscient at the other. Literally, they are opposite in execution and effect.

FIRST-PERSON POINT OF VIEW

First person is the most subjective point of view you can choose. It most closely replicates our experience in reality. Most stories written

in first person feature one viewpoint for the whole short story or novel, and that person is the protagonist. Here is an example of a first-person human viewpoint for the same "woman with a Border collie" scene:

> I breathed deeply. The fall air caught me off guard, crisp, stinging my cheeks, chasing away the suffocating heaviness. Jordie—dead one week. I never expected to be a widow at forty-five. I glanced down at Checkers, so eager for his morning run, totally innocent of anything but the moment. What a comfort he was. With a yip, he scrambled into a run, and I looked up, seagulls already taking flight as he tried, hopelessly, to herd them as though they were sheep. I laughed, caught myself. My heart filled my chest until it ached. *How dare you laugh when he'll never get that chance.* I pointed at the ground, called Checkers back. If only I could pick up my life with a simple command.

Emotionally, first-person point of view is "hottest;" the intensity of the protagonist's emotional expression is the most direct, and the chance for reader identification with the character is the strongest. A disadvantage of first person as a viewpoint choice is that the immediacy and intensity of the voice can wear a reader out. It is the smallest "box" in which you can write, because you cannot let your character know anything outside of his or her own direct experience. Sticking with one character throughout a work can bore a reader. While first-person viewpoint appears as the easiest of the choices, it requires a lot of finesse.

OMNISCIENT POINT OF VIEW

Omniscient means "all-seeing." This viewpoint allows the author to "be anywhere." It allows the author to write objectively or subjectively for any character, for inanimate objects, and for the author's philosophy—all in the same paragraph if you choose. In other words, omniscient offers the writer the most freedom, while first person of-

fers the least freedom. You'd think that any writer would jump at the chance to have the greatest literary license, however, the greatest freedom, which allows the widest perspective, necessitates the most control and skill. What you gain in freedom, you may sacrifice in emotion and intensity. Omniscient is the "coolest" emotion because of its distance and breadth. In the hands of aspiring novelists, character depth usually suffers with this viewpoint simply because the author can—and often does—bounce the viewpoint around within one paragraph or page. Covering a lot of ground, i.e., many characters' viewpoints, necessarily limits development of any one character. Here is an example of omniscient viewpoint using the same situation, but notice how you react to the shifts from one viewpoint to another:

A disadvantage of first person as a viewpoint choice is that the immediacy and intensity of the voice can wear a reader out.

> Checkers ran into the field, scattering the seagulls. A salty, rich blend of feather and meat filled his snout. He saw a flash of wing and ran, pulled grass under his front feet and pushed away with his back feet. Susan watched the gulls, already taking flight as the Border collie tried, hopelessly, to herd them as though they were sheep. She laughed, caught herself. Her heart filled her chest until it ached. *How dare I laugh when Jordie will never get that chance.* Dead one week. She never expected to be a widow at forty-five. The dog stopped, looked up, heard the thrump of wings beating air, squawks and screeches all around. During winter, seagulls frequently sought food and shelter inland. He loped around the field then saw Susan pointing at the dirt. "Let's go home, boy." Although she wished she could pick up her life with a simple command, within six months, she would be living three thousand miles away in a life too busy for grief.

If you look closely, you'll see that the omniscient paragraph above includes many of the sentences lifted from the prior three examples. I've also changed the pronoun "I" to "she." In one paragraph, the

Omniscient point of view rarely works, or works well, except in the hands of a masterful writer.

reader gets *five* perspectives: objective, subjective dog, subjective woman, subjective first person (for the one line of "direct thought"), and objective author (in the last line and in the sentence about gulls sheltering inland).

Admittedly, the above paragraph doesn't work. Omniscient point of view rarely works, or works well, except in the hands of a masterful writer. For a better example, consider this partial paragraph in omniscient viewpoint, written by Ann-Marie MacDonald in *Fall on Your Knees*, an Oprah Book Club selection. The following excerpt involves a woman named Kathleen who is dying during childbirth.

> This is a breech birth; the child is stuck feet first. Someone will not get out of this room alive. There was a choice to be made. It has been made. Or at least the choice has been allowed to occur. Everything disappears from sound for Kathleen: Her mother's voice—by now perhaps speaking in tongues or at least the mother tongue—the pounding of her father's fists on the door—he'll break it down in a moment. She levitates in a profound and complete relief, peace, floating absence of pain. It's all over for her now, anyone can see that.

One of the very best examples of omniscient viewpoint I've read, where the characters are also warm and vividly drawn, is Larry McMurtry's *Lonesome Dove*. Even though omniscient viewpoint is common to thrillers, for instance, I often think that these stories would have been stronger in multiple third-person viewpoint. It may take a near Pulitzer level of skill to write superbly in this viewpoint choice.

SECOND-PERSON POINT OF VIEW

As a writer, you have other viewpoint choices. One rarely used option is second person, which relies upon the exclusive use of the pronoun "you." As you might imagine, this is difficult to sustain for any length of time. Examples of entire novels written in second person are rare.

Bright Lights, Big City, by Jay McInerney is considered a tour de force of second-person writing. Here is an excerpt:

> You are not the kind of guy who would be at a place like this at this time of the morning. But here you are, and you cannot say that the terrain is entirely unfamiliar, although the details are fuzzy. You are at a nightclub talking to a girl with a shaved head.

Use of second-person viewpoint is as common in brief usage as it is uncommon for an entire novel. Most of the time, writers use "you" to talk to the indefinite reader as in this example by Sandra Scofield in *A Chance to See Egypt*:

> You would not call the Posada Celestial a resort, although ninety years ago it was a home away from home for Don Porfirio. It is a small hotel in a small town.

Second-person viewpoint is not to be confused with the use of the pronoun "you" in dialogue. Dialogue has no viewpoint. Interpretation of it reveals a viewpoint. Here is an example of the use of "you" where there is no viewpoint, in an exchange in *The Bluest Eye*, by Toni Morrison:

> "You mean that's when *you* got old," China said.
> "I ain't never got old. Just fat."
> "Same thing."
> "You think 'cause you skinny, folks think you young? You'd make a haint buy a girdle."
> "And you look like the north side of a southbound mule."

Second person is difficult, if not tedious, to maintain for an entire short story, much less for an entire novel. It can quickly make the reader "stare" at the writer, so to speak; become aware of the use of the viewpoint as an artificial device. The repetition of "you" can also have a powerful, riveting effect on a reader. It is arresting. It's as if the

narrator reaches out from the page and grabs the reader by the lapels and yanks him into the story as a participant, just as someone in conversation, using "you" to describe events that you have not been a party to, will create a feeling that you are in cahoots nevertheless. If a writer is skillful, the coercion will feel friendly, inviting, and the reader's emotional empathy can be greatly intensified.

To expand your facility with second-person viewpoint, craft a short story that uses this viewpoint exclusively. Add it to your repertoire for limited, but powerful use, in other pieces.

THIRD-PERSON POINT OF VIEW

That leaves third-person subjective viewpoint, also called "close third." Like omniscient, third person uses the following pronouns: she, he, and they. Unlike omniscient, third-person viewpoint, for a scene, chapter, or entire book, provides the reader with the vicarious experience of being the character, similar to first person. Read the following excerpt from the children's novel, *Park's Quest*, by Katherine Paterson:

> He reached out, grateful that on that tall stone the name he needed could be reached, and lightly traced the letters of his father's name. The stone felt warm from the winter sun. It wasn't like a gravestone at all. It was like something alive and lovely. He could see his own hand reflected across his father's name. Tears started in his eyes, surprising him, because he felt so happy to be here, so close to actually touching that handsome man in his jaunty cap with the tie of his uniform loose and the neck unbuttoned.

Third-person viewpoint offers a kind of happy medium between the intensity and tight restrictions of first person and the distant boundary-less problems of omniscient. If we were Goldilocks, we'd say "third-person viewpoint is just right." In terms of emotional connection with the reader, it's warm, not hot like first or cool to cold like omniscient. In addition, third-person viewpoint offers just

enough distance to give a writer more latitude to describe emotions in a way that might sound self-absorbed or neurotic if expressed in first person. Additionally, the tight focus on one subjective viewpoint allows deeper development of character and control of suspense than in the ever-changing viewpoint of omniscient.

Third-person viewpoint offers a kind of happy medium between the intensity and tight restrictions of first person and the distant boundary-less problems of omniscient.

Even though third person is the most common viewpoint in fiction, what are its disadvantages? Because it is a compromise to some extent, this viewpoint can contribute to a lack of affect, a washed-out emotion, almost as if the writer is sitting on the fence, unwilling to commit in a way that is unavoidable in first person. Most stories require an increase in emotional and dramatic intensity, not a lessening of it, and the choice of third person can sacrifice intensity over first person.

CHOOSING AND MIXING POINTS OF VIEW

Most novelists use multiple, subjective, third-person viewpoint. This means that authors develop the thoughts, feelings, yearnings, past experiences, goals, and physical sensations of more characters than just their protagonists. The choice of multiple viewpoints is also called "limited third-person" to distinguish this choice from omniscient viewpoint, which is unlimited.

Nearly all short stories use one viewpoint, either third person or first person, for their entirety. They are simply too short to develop multiple viewpoints *in any depth* and, at the same time, to keep the story moving toward the climax. It is difficult in the short length to develop one subjective viewpoint. For these same reasons, omniscient is likewise rarely used for short stories. You could say that omniscient viewpoint is too broad and too distant to effectively develop character and maintain suspense in 3,000 to 10,000 words, the average range of short-story length.

In the last decade or so, some authors have published novels with

a mixture of viewpoints not usually combined within one book. The most common mixture is a first-person viewpoint for a protagonist and multiple, third-person viewpoints for one or more other characters. For example, Barbara Kingsolver frequently combines viewpoints, using first-person for her protagonist and third-person for her main characters.

Changing viewpoints smoothly takes great skill. When a writer shifts from a first-person narrator to a third-person narrator, or from one, third-person character to another within one paragraph, or even from section to section, the shift often jars the reader. Once your writing succeeds in seducing the reader and getting him to suspend disbelief, you don't want to break the spell. When you jar the reader, you make the reader aware of you, the writer. You push him out of the story and into an experience of your (clumsy) transition.

I advise my students and editing clients to master their control of the most common (and effective) viewpoint choices before taking on the more difficult or experimental forms.

If character depth is your goal, a singular subjective viewpoint—first person or third person—holds the greatest promise. However, your story, audience, or the genre may necessitate multiple viewpoints. How do you choose? Circumstances may dictate what to do. You may have a plot complication that takes place out of the view of your protagonist, so you need another character and scene to show it. You may be writing for twelve-year-olds, such as Paterson's *Park's Quest* mentioned earlier, and the convention for that age group is a singular viewpoint for the entire book. Or, you may be writing a thriller, a genre that nearly always calls for multiple viewpoints.

For instance, "Ghost Ship," the second chapter of *Atlantis Found*, a thriller by Clive Cussler, has four separate sections, each divided by a "soft hiatus," four line spaces. The novel is written in omniscient viewpoint, although individual sections may favor one, third-person viewpoint. Typical of thrillers, Cussler shifts between several points of view, such as in this novel's second chapter: Section 1: Roxanna Mender's pov mixed with omniscient-author; Section 2: Mostly omniscient-author but shifts to Captain Bradford Mender, Rox-

anna's husband; Section 3: Roxanna, then omniscient mixed with both Roxanna and Mender's povs; Section 4: Roxanna and omniscient.

How many viewpoints are ideal for a multiple viewpoint novel? A simple answer is to assign as many third-person, subjective viewpoints as your story requires. For instance, in the Xenogenesis series, by Hugo and Nebula Award–winner Octavia E. Butler, the first novel, *Dawn*, maintains a singular third-person viewpoint throughout. This viewpoint serves to anchor the reader in protagonist Lilith Iyapo, a strong character who will carry the whole series. Through her singular viewpoint, Lilith, a human, introduces readers to unusual, octopuslike sentient aliens who might otherwise "alienate" the reader if they had a viewpoint.

However, in *Adulthood Rites*, the second book in the series, Butler provides multiple viewpoints—of Lilith, of her part-human part-alien son Akin, who is the protagonist, and of her human mate, Tony, as well as of several other humans and of the Oankali, the aliens. By book two, the reader of the series is fully involved in the world and eager to share the many different realities. Even so, Butler provides most of the development to Akin, the protagonist.

In a brilliant selection of point of view, Butler chooses first person for her final book, *Imago*, in this fantasy series. The brightness of the first-person voice and immediacy of experience perfectly matches protagonist Jodahs, who is neither human nor alien, but a "human construct" with two human parents, Lilith and Tino, and three Oankali parents. First person creates the perfect intensity to experience Jodahs's challenge as the singular character who struggles to fulfill the vision of the Ooankali, and save humankind, in the conclusion of this trilogy.

Chapter six will extend the discussion of how many viewpoints is ideal in the context of combining character, story, and plot. For deepening characterization, however, the fewer the viewpoints, the greater your chance to develop character in depth.

As we have discussed, however, point of view is ultimately a characterization tool. Writers have a moment-by-moment decision about

how subjectively they want and need to draw their characters. Some places in a story demand fast pace, action, or summary. Other places call for answers to a character's motive. A stimulus requires a response, but should you say, "He flinched," or should you go on for a page developing the full range of physical sensations, memories, implications of the actions, emotions, and relevance to the character's psychological need? These are decisions that you, and only you, can ultimately make.

The best way to find your individual answer in any given piece of writing is to read the kind of work you are writing. Practice until you get your million words behind you—the number John D. MacDonald claimed were necessary to become a pro—and use your gut. Your intuition in combination with tuning in to your body's physical signals, i.e. gut instinct, will often tell you how much to write and what to write.

Archetypes of Characterization

The meaningful past you create for your characters will explain their needs, strengths, and weaknesses. Although these three will be entirely individual for each character, archetypes offer a tool that stems from collective roles instead of individual experience. Archetypes can supply or reinforce the need, strength, and weakness that comes from a character's meaningful past.

Psychiatrist Carl Jung coined the term *archetype* to represent "primordial images" that take on mythic proportion, are universal among all people, and are held in what he termed, "the collective unconscious." Examples of common archetypes include: the Mother, the Father, the Baby, the Son, the Daughter, the Priest, the Mentor, the Ruler, the Servant, etc. In other words, some archetypes represent universal roles in the family and society. There are dozens of archetypes based on roles—the Soldier, the Physician, the Politician, and so forth.

To develop depth of characterization, the most helpful archetypes

RECOMMENDED READING ON ARCHETYPES

***The Complete Writer's Guide to Heroes & Heroines: Sixteen Master Archetypes*, by Tami D. Cowden, Caro LaFever, and Sue Viders**

***The Hero Within: Six Archetypes We Live By*, by Carol S. Pearson**

***Awakening the Heroes Within: Twelve Archetypes to Help Us Find Ourselves and Transform Our World*, by Carol S. Pearson**

***45 Master Characters: Mythic Models for Creating Original Characters*, by Victoria Lynn Schmidt**

are ones that represent the psychological reality of your characters. Based on twenty years of study and inspired by Joseph Campbell's work, psychologist Carol S. Pearson outlined twelve psychological archetypes that correspond to the twelve steps of the Hero's Journey. She defines an archetype as an "inner guide" that "exemplifies a way of being on the journey" and "resides as energy within the unconscious psychological life of people everywhere."

Stage of Journey	Archetype	Goal	Fear
Preparation	*Innocent*	Remain safe	Abandonment
	Orphan	Regain safety	Exploitation
	Warrior	Win	Weakness
	Caregiver	Help others	Selfishness
The Journey	*Seeker*	Search for a better life	Conformity
	Lover	Bliss	Loss of love
	Destroyer	Metamorphosis	Annihilation
	Creator	Identity	Inauthenticity

Stage of Journey	Archetype	Goal	Fear
Return	*Ruler*	Order	Chaos
	Magician	Transformation	Evil sorcery
	Sage	Truth	Deception
	Fool	Enjoyment	Nonaliveness

Pearson's book, *Awakening the Heroes Within: Twelve Archetypes to Help us Find Ourselves and Transform our World*, was not written with fiction writers in mind, but it can supply tremendous insights into our characters. Pearson explains that we can experience any or even all of the twelve archetypes in a single day. In other words, life is complex and one individual might be on many, simultaneous journeys, both small and great. For example, I experience many of the archetypes. With an empty nest, I sometimes feel like an Orphan. When I turned fifty, I became a Seeker again. Aging parents tap my inner Caretaker, and so forth. Remember, however, that fiction is selective.

If you analyze stories and movies to identify Pearson's archetypes, you'll begin to see how universal they are. The following list offers a list of protagonists and their corresponding archetype at the beginning of their stories. To become more familiar with the twelve archetypes, see if you can name the archetype that each of the following characters becomes by the end of their stories.

Character	Archetype	Novel	Author
Macon Leary	*Orphan*	*The Accidental Tourist*	Anne Tyler
Belle	*Caregiver*	*Beauty and the Beast*	Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont

Character	Archetype	Novel	Author
Evelyn Couch	*Caregiver*	*Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe*	Fannie Flagg
Scarlett O'Hara	*Destroyer*	*Gone with the Wind*	Margaret Mitchell
Michael Corleone	*Ruler/Warrior*	*The Godfather*	Mario Puzo
Jo March	*Seeker*	*Little Women*	Louisa May Alcott
Clarice Starling	*Warrior*	*Silence of the Lambs*	Thomas Harris

Moving into a different archetype usually shows character growth, although characters in tragedies can devolve rather than evolve. If there is no change in the archetype, can you show what the character has come to realize? When you begin to assign archetypes to your protagonist, antagonist, and other point-of-view characters, you'll see your stories in a different light. You'll also be able to give your characters psychological goals that are at cross purposes to each other or select behavior that reflects a weakness because it is exactly opposite to what the archetype yearns for.

To make best use of these twelve archetypes, I recommend that you determine which ones best match your protagonist's psychological state at the beginning of your story, throughout the middle, and at the end. For short stories, maintain one archetype throughout, but explore the character's eventual recognition of the qualities of that archetype. Or, show your protagonist's growth from one archetype at the beginning to another one at the end.

Not all characters, even protagonists, need to progress through all of the archetypes in one book to be deeply drawn and satisfying to their story, genre, and reader. Like using any other tool, you want to be creative with the use of archetypes. However, if your protagonist

begins and ends your story reflecting the same archetype, revise to show character evolution to another archetype or to make sure that you have plumbed the depths of the one archetype.

Read Carol Pearson's book and gain a wealth of information to help you deepen that archetype. She offers the archetypal story that best matches each archetype—and much more. I also recommend her prior book, *The Hero Within: Six Archetypes We Live By*, in which she develops the archetype of The Innocent, The Orphan, The Wanderer, The Warrior, The Altruist, and The Magician.

Connecting Character with Creator

During my thirteen years of leading three or four weekly critique groups, I observed a pattern among writers who had written several novels. A writer might change genres, styles, stories, and characters, but every novel typically conveyed a similar theme based on a universal need I suspected was the writer's biggest struggle in life.

Can you learn how to write fiction without addressing the creator of the writing? I don't think so. Among my students and editing clients, I see a high correlation between the themes of novels or short stories and the yearnings of the writers. Protagonists usually struggle with the very same issues of human need that have wounded the writers. Our works are a reflection of our individual selves and of the culture and time in which we live.

When you consciously recognize yourself in your writing, you begin a new day. The link between your emotions as an Orphan, for instance, and your protagonist's emotions as an Orphan can allow you to infuse your work with power and authenticity. You may discover that the meaningful past you created for your story involves a different event but with the same emotional result as a trauma in your own life. Once you realize that your protagonist was rendered powerless (by an oppressive father, for instance), you can bring all of your own suffering of powerlessness, for instance from an oppressive foster mother, to your character's quest.

When you harvest your emotions, you can do so with consciousness of the direct relationship between you and your characters. If you begin to feel uncomfortable emotions, *you're on the right track.* If you feel nothing, you may be experiencing the initial denial of the Orphan archetype and may need to work past that, or through it, to recover feeling, and some of those feelings may be dominated by anger at having a less than ideal life and fear over the necessity to survive on your own.

You may discover that the meaningful past you created for your story involves a different event but with the same emotional result as a trauma in your own life.

Is there always a link? I believe that all works are a reflection, in some way, of their creators and of the time and culture in which their authors lived. However, I do believe that writers can and do transcend their own traumatic pasts and yearnings when writing fiction. I know some authors who believe that "real art" is found when a writer transcends his own issues and emotions. I believe real art is everywhere, while quality is a personal judgment.

Because I have shared the writing journey of many aspiring fiction writers, I will go on record with this statement: To the extent that writers can figure out the emotional connection between their protagonists, stories, and themselves, I believe they can write with more power, greater honesty, and increased impact. I invite you to think about yourself in light of the hero and heroine's journey, the archetypes, the Enneagrams, and the meaningful pasts and make a connection with your story people. A different kind of verisimilitude—virtual reality goes both ways—creator to creation and back again.

AT this point, you can add the work you did in chapter two, creating a character from the inside out and the outside in, to the work from this chapter: crafting a meaningful past that explains your character's need and its origin in a traumatic event. Your character must have a weakness and a strength. Your characters are now assured of being three-dimensional.

From chapters three and four, you learned about structure and can select the best one for each story, whether you are writing a short story or a longer work. In turn, the type of work—in length and genre—will lead you to make decisions about point of view, how many, and which characters to develop deeply.

Finally, you have the tools of two archetypal approaches—the hero and heroine's journey, to help map structure, and the twelve character archetypes, to develop deep universal characterization.

Beginning with chapter seven, you're ready to issue a casting call, work out major and minor roles, and join character with story with plot.

SEVEN

Casting Characters for Story and Plot

I am a Dominican, hyphen, American. As a fiction writer, I find that the most exciting things happen in the realm of that hyphen—the place where two worlds collide or blend together.

Julia Alvarez

THE CHARACTER CHEMISTRY of Spencer Tracy and Katherine Hepburn is legendary. Some actors, like Halle Berry or Antonio Banderas, seem to sizzle with personal chemistry. Others, like Kathleen Turner and William Hurt in *Body Heat*, project their couple chemistry so effectively, they get the audience's blood boiling. While the actors themselves deserve the credit they get, much of the success of a movie rests on the shoulders of the casting director.

You're the casting director of your story. If you've made efforts to fill out a hero or heroine's journey and have considered how to create a three-dimensional, point-of-view protagonist, you're ready to select actors for your story.

Few stories have just one character. Even a "man against nature" story such as Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* or Jack London's "To Build a Fire" has more than one other character. The marlin in Hemingway's story and the Husky dog in London's story are also characters. In fact, they are strongly drawn archetypes of na-

ture's prowess or superiority. In stories like these, nature herself—the sea or the bitter cold—is a character. The elements make for deadly adversaries. Characters, like the real-life people they represent, simply don't exist in a vacuum.

Most stories have at least two characters, and usually far more. Some novels, like *War and Peace*, boast hundreds of characters. Besides determining how many characters your story needs, as the casting director you have to decide which supporting roles you must fill. These, too, can be enhanced by selection for character chemistry.

By character chemistry, I mean the sparks of energy projected between individuals involved in sexual, platonic, or adversarial relationships. Remember, chemistry is the basis of alchemy. As magician-storyteller, you want to combine the right mixtures for the most powerful results. When you give your characters the right individual and combined chemistries, the released energy leaps from the page. It deeply affects your reader as they vicariously live the characters' tragedies and triumphs.

As casting director, you will see certain basic roles occurring again and again in your writing. Not all of these roles will occur in every story, but this list of character types can help you figure out who to include.

- protagonist or co-protagonists
- partner or sidekick
- mate or romantic interest
- allies or main characters
- antagonists or villains
- neutral or minor characters

Protagonist or Co-Protagonists

Casting the wrong character as your protagonist is a common and disheartening mistake among aspiring fiction writers. I know; I've done it. This is discouraging if you have written a short story, but it is especially depressing if you have been working for a few years—or decades—on a novel. How do you know with certainty who to choose as leading lady or leading man?

Protagonists need to meet at least three qualifications:

1. They must own the story problem.
2. The stakes must be high and worthy.
3. They must solve or resolve the story problem.

OWNING THE STORY PROBLEM

The protagonist of a story is the "mover and the shaker," the character who *must* own the story problem introduced by your inciting incident or call to adventure and act on it. If the problem belongs to a neighbor or friend, the writer must satisfactorily answer why he did not select that character as the protagonist. For instance, in mysteries, a victim or friend of a victim seeks out a private eye for help. The private eye is the protagonist, yet the problem belongs to the client, not to the P.I. However, by job role, once private investigators, police detectives, or insurance investigators accept a job, the problem becomes their own. They may at first Refuse the Call to Adventure in the Hero's Journey, but once they accept the challenge and make the commitment, they own the problem.

As an example, suppose that Tomas's girlfriend, Marie, was shot and killed. You want Tomas to be your protagonist. You must answer why finding her murderer is *his* problem to solve. In our society, the average citizen would expect law enforcement to do this job. You

must close all gaps in story logic before your reader will accept Tomas as your protagonist.

A writer can, of course, create a setup where finding her murderer would fall on Tomas's shoulders. Suppose the police haul in her ex-lover, who confesses to the crime, or someone else happens to fit the criteria of motive and opportunity. Suppose the police close the case, but Marie's brother or Tomas's friends make him suspect that the police have the wrong person. He goes to the police, as any citizen would, and they ignore him—for *logical* reasons that you must create. Or, suppose Tomas falls under suspicion for her murder (they always look at nearest and dearest first)—a stronger reason yet—but they have not yet arrested him, and it's up to him to clear himself before they do.

The point to remember is that you should select as your protagonist the character who "inherits" the problem and who has a desperate need to solve, or resolve, that problem.

HIGH AND WORTHY STAKES

What are the stakes in your story? What will your character lose if he or she fails to solve the problem? What does he or she stand to gain?

The higher the stakes, the stronger the situation and suspense. Obviously, life and death are high stakes. The worse the crime, the higher the stakes. Kidnapping and rape are worse than burglary, for instance.

I once edited a novel in which the protagonist, an investigator, was hired by a wealthy multinational firm to investigate white-collar embezzlement. The firm itself was crooked, and the top brass wanted to find the crook within their ranks and kill him. The payoff for the protagonist, i.e., what he stood to gain, was money. In other words, the stakes of the story involved greed and corruption. I had to tell the writer that he had an unsympathetic protagonist—greed is an unworthy motive—and an unsympathetic crime, because the firm itself was corrupt.

Not only must the stakes be high—often involving life and death

matters—they must be worthy enough to evoke the reader's care and concern. Readers who care about what is at stake invest in the outcome of the story and root for the protagonist's success, because they realize what could be lost. An innocent man could be sent to jail as in *Snow Falling on Cedars* or *To Kill a Mockingbird.* Spouses who have lost a son could lose each other as in *Accidental Tourist* or *The Deep End of the Ocean.* Readers live vicariously through the protagonist and, in the magic of the story, entrust their emotions to the author.

Many stories involve emotional and spiritual stakes, which can be just as high and worthy as physical stakes. A couple makes a last-ditch effort to save their marriage and keep their children from suffering the fallout of divorce. A woman who made a bad choice that ruined her reputation now has a chance to make a good choice that will redeem it. These characters stand to lose, or gain, their dignity and self-respect—high stakes for any person. And the emotional wounds if they fail could prove devastating.

If you are writing a "quieter" story where the stakes are emotional or spiritual, make sure your stakes are clear. Occasionally, I've edited a story in which the stakes and what they mean are vague and not compelling enough, such as seeking happiness. Or the loss is not a great enough loss for reader investment in the outcome, such as loss of a promotion.

SOLVING OR RESOLVING THE STORY PROBLEM

Finally, your protagonist must be actively involved in the finale of your story. Your protagonist may have backup, he may have a buddy or co-protagonist at his side, but he must face the "villain" and win—if you intend a happy ending. In the structure of conventional stories, and especially in a high proportion of commercial fiction, the hero acts alone to win the battle. This corresponds to the heroic quest we discussed in chapter four. It also works well with developing the protagonist in depth and demonstrating through your plot how the *story,* the inner need, is resolved by the outer triumph.

Think about it: If another character "steals the thunder" and

solves the problem, then the reader may remain unconvinced that the protagonist has earned the personal growth representative of "Resurrection and Rebirth," the prize for passing the final test in the Hero's Journey. It is nearly impossible to show convincing character change if the protagonist has, in essence, not finished the journey. Imagine how different you would feel if Sam, not Frodo, had dealt with Gollum and the ring. Imagine how different the story would have been had someone other than Luke Skywalker fought Darth Vader. Imagine how unsatisfying it would have been if the wizard had piloted Dorothy back to Kansas.

Likewise, avoid rescue of your protagonist at the crisis, when his or her pain is greatest. *Deus ex machina* is the phrase originating with the Greeks to describe the intervention of heaven, i.e., god, in the affairs of humans. In the children's stories I edit, I occasionally see a protagonist who is lost in the woods and gets saved by a unicorn, or by his friend the talking deer, or by a fairy, or by his older sister, or worst of all, by an adult. All of these saviors rob protagonists of the chance to overcome their own weaknesses, exercise heroic strength, and prove they can do what they once thought was impossible. In the vernacular of the twelve-step programs, the author has been codependent and rescued the protagonist from a chance at personal growth and accomplishment.

Co-Protagonists

If you can structure your story without co-protagonists, I advise it. Otherwise, you'll have to split in two the space you devote for deeper main-character development. You'll have to make sure the pair shares a similar drive and motivation to the goal. They will both have to "own the problem," and they will both have to actively vanquish the adversary and solve the problem at the climax. They will both have to awaken to their weakness, its relationship to the wound from the past, and demonstrate growth and learning at the end of the story.

Like twins, co-protagonists have to share a same character arc,

even if they act independently of each other in the plot. You'll have to provide a solid answer to a question of story logic: Why do you need two protagonists? If your answer is because you liked the idea, that isn't sufficient.

Like twins, co-protagonists have to share a same character arc, even if they act independently of each other in the plot.

Plenty of authors have successfully written co-protagonists, although it is far more common to see buddies or sidekicks than it is to see true co-protagonists. One common exception is in category romances, where a hero and heroine may have equal development. Among the standout mainstream romances where this is true, three come to mind: *Gone with the Wind*, by Margaret Mitchell, *Love Story*, by Erich Segal, and *The Bridges of Madison County*, by Robert James Waller.

Two novels, strikingly different in all but the manner in which their authors have handled the co-protagonist roles, are *A Virtuous Woman*, by Kaye Gibbons, and *Dirty Work*, by Larry Brown. In Gibbons's love story, she alternates viewpoints between a husband whose wife is dying of cancer and the wife, who reminisces about their life together. Brown's novel is the gritty story of two veterans in a VA hospital, one black and one white, who share memories of the Vietnam war and compare the devastation of their lives. Despite their different stories, both of these novels succeed in great measure because of the contrast between the co-protagonists, i.e., a dying wife versus the husband she will leave behind, and two soldiers in a similar situation but of different races, life histories, and opportunity.

If co-protagonists demand great skill on the part of a writer, group protagonists demand even more. Occasionally, one of my clients will have a novel with three or four co-protagonists, usually women friends. Think how difficult it is to distinguish women friends, in voice, manner, and description, and how difficult it is to create depth of characterization while, at the same time, developing a singular theme. You need to be a master of the craft to accomplish this.

Margaret Atwood is that master. She utilizes the full palette of psychological peculiarities to draw three female protagonists in *The Robber Bride*. Tony, the primary protagonist, is happiest spending her time re-creating ancient French battles in her cellar. Obsessed with war strategies, she uses peppercorns, lentils, and Monopoly pieces for the various armies. The second protagonist, Charis, is characterized as a half-crazed psychic who "refuses to participate in certain emotions." Roz is the third woman, a founding editor of a magazine for women called *WiseWomanWorld*, yet she needs her therapist to help her "figure out what story she is in." A consummate literary artist, Atwood can succeed with a story involving three women protagonists because of her skill in deep characterization. Where Atwood succeeds with multiple protagonists, I would advise you, "Don't try this at home," not until you have a lot of experience writing fiction.

Partner or Sidekick

Consider Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, who represent the quintessential model of investigator and assistant, protagonist and sidekick. Different from the ally, friend, or co-protagonist, this kind of duo typically features two characters, usually unequal in power or stature and often acting as each other's alter ego. The partner or sidekick role is indispensable to characterization—especially for contrast and chemistry—and for advancement of the plot, and frequently, he or she operates like a co-protagonist, although most often, without a point of view.

Mysteries are infamous for the partner or sidekick: Tony Hillerman's Jim Chee, a Navajo tribal policeman, and his assistant, retired police officer Joe Leaphorn; Dennis Lahane's private detective duo, Patrick Kenzi and Angela Gennaro; Margaret Miles's widow sleuth Charlotte Willett and her eccentric neighbor Richard Longfellow. In each of these partner relationships, as in the ones featured in the next resource box, you'll see that the authors have worked to create contrasting characters—by age, gender, physical ability, race, job title, or

A SAMPLING OF MYSTERY DUOS

- **Bruce Cook's Sir John Fielding, blind magistrate, and his ward and assistant, young Jeremy Proctor**
- **Robert Barnard's Mike Oddie, chief inspector, and Charlie Peace, detective constable**
- **Rita Mae Brown's Mary Minor "Harry" Haristeen, postal worker, and Mrs. Murphy, gray tiger cat**
- **Margaret Coel's Vicky Holden, Arapaho Indian lawyer, and Father John O'Malley, Roman Catholic priest**
- **Dianne Day's Fremont Jones, spirited and independent woman and life partner with Michael Archer, private eye**
- **Jeffery Deaver's Lincoln Rhyme, brilliant forensic criminologist and quadriplegic, and Amelia Sachs, beat cop**

species. Further, in character development, the partners usually have strikingly different personalities from their protagonists, especially in expression of humor. Sparks of difference, even conflict, increase rather than threaten the underlying bond and shared purpose: to determine who committed the crime and see justice prevail.

The advantage of making a sidekick or partner into a co-protagonist is the full development of a point of view, which grants the usual benefits of a second point of view: characterization of each other; separate plot development of different locales, scenes, and subplots; and reinforcement of the primary theme through a mirroring of a same inner yearning.

The disadvantage of making a sidekick or partner into a co-protagonist is diminishing the singular focus on the decision-making character or hero. Instead of being a satellite in orbit around this one character, co-protagonists are, in this metaphor, equal planets.

Mate or Romantic Interest

A protagonist's mate or romantic interest may be one and the same as a partner or sidekick but need not necessarily be so. He or she may be a main character with a point of view or merely a minor character only known through other characters. The purpose of including a character in the role of mate or romantic interest is like that of every important character—to deepen characterization and advance the plot.

Yet, the special role of an intimate other is unlike that of other characters. With this character, you can show the most deeply personal sides of your protagonist—physically and sexually, but more important, emotionally and psychically. Fewer attachments run deeper than the ones we hold for a mate, although the depth of that bond will depend on the characterization of your protagonist and your story. As you consider casting the intimate other, include the following uses of this character:

- To show the protagonist's story yearning through the intimate relationship, bringing the inner story to the forefront
- To show a private and personal side of your protagonist that would not otherwise become known
- To have a steamy sex scene to satisfy the needs of your story's genre
- To create conflict or even crisis at times when the external plot is at a low point of narrative tension
- To have a character who is a confidante to allow the protagonist to share his emotions and quandaries through active scenes and dialogue

The intimate other, if there is a serious love bond, allows the deepest possible drawing out of your protagonist's vulnerability.

- To create a love bond that could be threatened by the antagonist to raise the stakes of the story
- To show difficulty and crisis in the romantic interest to add pressure for change on the character
- To be a sounding board or mentor for the protagonist's decisions
- To develop a full subplot with an additional point of view for the intimate other, also allowing for characterization of the protagonist

Many of these nine uses of a mate or romantic interest can also be functions for a main character or ally. However, the intimate other, if there is a serious love bond, allows the deepest possible drawing out of your protagonist's vulnerability. The natural sexual chemistry in romantic interests additionally offers a chance to heighten reader suspense in the buildup of this special form of dramatic tension.

The romance genre treats the intimate other in an entirely different manner. As mentioned before, the man or woman who is the romantic interest is often like a co-protagonist and is always at least a main character. The prospective Mr. Right (in most cases) may also be the antagonist who becomes the prize at the end of the story. The romance publishers, at least for the mass-market paperback romances, freely publicize their guidelines for character development and preferred professions, ages, level of sexual explicitness, taboos, and other specifications. If you would like to write category romances, the development of your protagonist's mate or romantic interest should be based upon these guidelines.

Allies or Main Characters

You will probably choose a main character or several main characters for additional viewpoints to your protagonist's. This means that for

these main characters, you must determine the story yearning and the steps in the Hero's or Heroine's Journey. As was discussed in chapter six, one way to accomplish this is to create a traumatic past incident to explain the origin of their yearnings, weaknesses, and strengths. Only a portion of this information will make it into your novel, because you'll only have room for the full development of your protagonist, unless you make the ally or main character into a co-protagonist.

Allies or main characters are directly involved in the external plot, but they may or may not be involved in a protagonist's private life. They directly serve the protagonist's goals of overcoming opposition and pushing toward resolution of the story problem. The advantage of a main character with a viewpoint is that you can show events, places, successes, and setbacks that occur independently of the protagonist.

In an interesting aspect of the art of story, the reader may possess information and knowledge that the protagonist does not. This process operates to increase reader involvement. The classic situation that illustrates this idea is a horror movie where the audience wants to call out, "Don't open that door!" In this way, the audience becomes a character, as well as a protector and mentor, vicariously, to the protagonist.

In your role as casting director, remember to create allies and main characters that are individuals, distinctive from your protagonist, yet do not make them so distinctive as to upstage your protagonist. If your main character is funnier (or weirder, quirkier, or more colorful) than your hero, the reader will want to see the main character rather than the protagonist. The same goes for an eccentric character who dresses or acts weird, but in an endearing way—after all, this character is an ally. For instance, some critics believe that Vivi, mother of protagonist Sidda, in Rebecca Wells's *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, far overshadows Sidda.

So common is this problem of major (or minor) characters outshining protagonists that I post this as a red flag. In fact, in nearly every novel I have edited or critiqued in two decades, the protagonist has been the last character to emerge from the marble. I'll address the

reasons for and correction of this problem in South—Troubleshooting and Problem-Solving—but forewarned is forearmed. Develop your main characters and allies but develop your protagonist even more so. Use the list under "Mate and Romantic Interest" to create allies and main characters who deepen your protagonist and create movement in your plot.

Antagonists or Villains

You may be shocked to learn that the character who most drives a story is the antagonist. Whoever you designate to oppose the actions and desires of your protagonist is a powerful character and demands as much careful development as your protagonist.

Writers often forget that villains and antagonists should not be written as two-dimensional caricatures. In fact, most antagonists in fiction can be shaded closer to human weakness than to unredeemable evil.

Therefore, writers need to figure out their antagonists and create likeable and normal traits, behaviors, and relationships in addition to unlikable, immoral, and/or illegal behaviors and traits. Use the guidelines for character development in chapter two to help you develop your antagonist. Yet, remember that even the antagonist with a point of view typically has less "play," less on-page development than the protagonist or even than some other point-of-view characters. The reason for this is that you don't want to create empathy from your readers or risk divided loyalty to the protagonist and his or her story goals.

A great example of three-dimensional development in antagonists is *Horse Latitudes*, by thriller writer Robert Ferrigno. Intending to make his antagonists elicit reader empathy, these antiheroes care for each other and are so inept at killing their victim that the victim has to coach them in how to finish the deed.

Antagonists always have justifications for their actions, no matter how loathsome.

Truly horrific villains are particu-

larly difficult to make believable. Insane psychiatrist Hannibal Lecter from *The Silence of the Lambs,* by Thomas Harris, has become the archetype for this kind of villain. But even ultra-evil antagonists have a human side. In one critique group I belonged to, we had a code for remembering the human side of the horrific antagonist: kittens. In other words, even a serial killer might have a tender heart for kittens. We always laughed at the ridiculous image, but it was a great mnemonic for escaping two-dimensional characterization. You risk melodrama or unintended humor when your villain is depicted as Black Bart. The most chilling villain is someone the reader believes might exist, someone they can imagine as a threat to themselves or others. You can achieve the necessary high-wire emotions in your reader by the judicious use of specific detail that shows such a villain's criminal nature and his human nature that is just like the rest of us.

Dean Koontz's novels offer a superb example of point-of-view development of antagonists without crossing the line where the reader wants to root for them, and is a superb writer from whom to model development of antagonists and ultra-evil humans as well as altered animals. The intelligent experimental animal known as The Beast in Koontz's classic novel *Watchers* commits the most horrific disemboweling murders, yet he evokes reader understanding, if not sympathy. Even though he is a beast, he suffered from looks of repulsion and fear when people reacted to the ugliness that was forced upon him through the genetic experiment that created him. As a result, he cuts out eyes in magazine photos, symbolically ridding himself of hurt.

With the exception of these extreme cases of beasts or human beings that have become monsters, the majority of stories simply have your run-of-the-mill criminal or a character whose goals are diametrically opposed to your protagonist's.

Although the antagonist drives stories by his or her opposition, for good reason the antagonist is often left somewhat mysterious and far less defined than other major characters. The antagonist is not often given a point of view, because you cannot let your reader become too sympathetic to the rationale this character offers or to the back-story trauma that made him twisted or weak. Where the antagonist does

have a point of view, the writer's intention is often to give a deeply drawn portrait of a human gone awry.

If the focus of a story is on a person whose lower or animal nature motivates them, then the writer might be intending to cast an antihero and is likely to be writing a tragedy. Scarlet O'Hara is an antihero. Maybe the antihero starts out as a regular upstanding citizen and, through weakness and corrupting forces, sinks into perversity or criminality. Stephen King's antihero Delores Claiborne might fit this profile of a moral person who, for good reasons *to her*—in this case an abusive husband—commits a heinous crime, i.e., murder. Or, maybe the antihero is already corrupt when the story begins and the story is meant to take the reader into the seedy or unseemly reality of this kind of person. Shakespeare gave us, among others, Macbeth and Othello for antihero examples. Stephen King has given us the likes of Carrie, the young girl who murders all her classmates with her telekinetic powers, and Jack Torrence, the alcoholic father who goes mad in *The Shining*. Remember, too, the best villains believe in the same ideals as the protagonist, but the villain's methods of achieving the same end are opposite.

Many stories, such as romances and some mainstream and literary works, do not have a villain per se. However, these stories still need antagonists whose intention to thwart the protagonists' efforts are every bit as serious as the protagonists' need to succeed. Likewise, the perceived power of the antagonist and the protagonist must be equal, e.g., Mrs. Robinson, the older woman seductress; to Ben Braddock, the twenty-one-year-old student in *The Graduate*, by Charles Webb; or John McClane, New York veteran cop; to Hans Gruber, terrorist, in *Die Hard*, based on *Nothing Lasts Forever*, a novel by Roderick Thorp.

For an authentic and believable threat to a protagonist, a writer must build solid motivations for the antagonist based on solid character needs. For example, a mother who married a doctor and then withered for want of his attention does everything possible to block her daughter from seeing a young intern. The mother isn't a villain; she's an antagonist with good reason to block her daughter's desires.

In fact, at the story's beginning, she may appear to the protagonist and reader alike as an ally, her true intentions only to emerge over time. An antagonist like this mother will have justification for her actions, no matter how twisted. In most cases, this kind of antagonist is not granted a point of view, especially if you want to use a reversal and show her true colors at some later time in your story.

Neutral or Minor Characters

Nearly every short story or novel includes neutral or minor characters. They help writers craft realistic scenes that are peopled with characters in common social or job roles yet maintain focus on the point-of-view characters. These "bit characters" may appear once or many times—it doesn't matter. In fact, they shouldn't matter. A common mistake is to make the waiter or sheriff or sister of the protagonist too noticeable. Make sure you don't enjoy writing about a minor character so much that you allow that character to upstage the important action of the point-of-view character. The very fact that these characters are forgettable makes them useful for action or dialogue that might appear contrived or obvious if given to a point-of-view character.

On the other hand, you can use neutral or minor characters as messengers, as obstacles to scene goals, as goads to action, or for comic relief. Mysteries might take the prize for having the most neutral or minor characters who, even though they might be colorful, are also inconsequential. Here's how J. A. Jance introduces a lighthearted moment in her mystery, *Devil's Claw*. Protagonist Joanne Brady, sheriff, has just arrived at Quick Custom Metals to ask a few questions to Jay Quick, whose mother reportedly knew the missing girl. As the scene opens, he is discussing the dimensions of a metal coffin with a customer:

> "Some cats like to curl up in a little ball, you know," she was saying. "But not my Sidney. He always preferred to stretch out flat on the

cool tiles in the kitchen, more like a dog than a cat. So that's why I want to be sure this will be big enough. I don't want the poor thing to be scrunched up for all eternity."

It may have sounded like a bizarre request, but the man behind the counter seemed unfazed by it. "In that case, Mrs. Dearborn," he said, "you'd better bring us Sidney's exact measures so there's no mistake. Where is Sidney now?"

"Still at the vet's," Mrs. Dearborn replied. "They're keeping him on ice there until I can come back with the coffin." . . .

With that she gathered her purse from the counter, collected a crystal-knobbed cane, and hobbled her way toward the door.

This scene includes three neutral characters—Mr. Quick, Mrs. Dearborn, and mention of the vet. Sidney, too, if you press the point. Minor or neutral characters and their interactions add color and comedy as well as serve more active purposes in the plot.

How Many Main Characters and Viewpoints?

The easy answer is that you should have as many main characters as your story needs. Get rid of any characters who don't directly contribute to the plot or add *necessary* characterization to your protagonist and his or her quest.

Although you may have several main characters that are indispensable to building the depth of characterization and complexity of a novel's plot, you may have a score of neutral or minor characters, especially if your novel takes place in diverse settings or includes people from many walks of life.

As you may recall from the discussion of viewpoint in chapter six, the protagonist is usually the only viewpoint character from beginning to end in a first-person novel. Mainstream and literary novels typically have the most total number of viewpoints and characters, major and minor. Take a thriller, for instance. If it is written in the subjective, omniscient point of view, such as all of Clive Cussler's

The fewer main characters you use, the more control you retain.

Dirk Pitt thrillers, the author might include half a dozen main characters. They will carry subplots that take place at locales other than that of the protagonist and the main plot. The author may also have a dozen, brief, minor character viewpoints and yet another dozen neutral or minor character parts that do not have a viewpoint.

Outside of commercial blockbuster types of novels where omniscient may be the viewpoint, other mainstream and literary novels will use multiple, third-person subjective viewpoints usually with much more successful development of their characters and stories. The fewer main characters you use, the more control you retain. In his popular workshop based on his book, *Writing the Breakout Novel*, literary agent Donald Maass advises writers to increase the relatedness of characters and give them more than one role. Thus, your protagonist's boss might also be his best friend's husband and his golf partner on weekends. Look for ways to reduce your cast by increasing their relatedness. The effect will be to increase your control and the chances for dramatic stakes between the characters.

Finally, if you are just beginning to write multiple viewpoint novels, limit your total viewpoints to less than six, preferably three, the fewer the better. However, also choose the number of viewpoints according to what your story demands.

When you have finished your job as casting director, choosing exactly the number of major and minor characters and viewpoints that you need for your particular story—and no more—you're ready to don a new hat—director. In chapter eight, you'll meet the six sherpas that will help you write effective scenes, with all the shortcuts and tricks that allow you to create the most effective plots.

EIGHT

Mapping from A to B to Z

Life is either a daring adventure or nothing. To keep our faces toward change and behave like free spirits in the presence of fate is strength undefeatable.

Helen Keller

PHYLLIS WHITNEY, THE famous writer with more than one hundred novels to her credit, described her ideal timeline and methods for writing a book as these: two months for research, including filling in characterization worksheets and blocking out her plot; two months for writing the first draft, according to a quota-per-day page count; and two months to revise and rewrite. Six months per novel.

Whether you hope to write novels or short stories, you are more likely to start—and finish—if you follow a plan. As you approach the day when you begin writing, you may notice an increase in a mixture of excitement and trepidation. There is an inverse relationship between preparation and first-draft writing: the longer time spent preparing, the shorter time spent writing. If you've already followed all of the preparation work recommended in this book, you may wonder, "What else is left?"

Up to now, you have addressed the larger issues of mapping out a short story or a novel. But how do you write from chapter to chapter, section to section, or even paragraph to paragraph? If you are writing

a short story, how do you develop continuity, narrative tension, and reader interest from your first word to your last?

You need the "Six Sherpas." The word *sherpa* refers to Tibetans who guide mountaineers and carry their heavy packs. Your literary sherpas will enable you to write *anything*, long or short, serious or frivolous, experimental or commercial. Everything covered in prior chapters—the five-part structure, Hero's or Heroine's Journey, other whole-story outlines, and characterization development—are indispensable for mapping your work as a whole. These next six elements of craft are indispensable for *writing* word by word. Here are the Six Sherpas:

- Scenes
- Subtext
- Sequels
- Shortcuts
- Segues
- Set pieces

Scenes and Subtext

A one-word definition for scene is "action." As used in writing fiction, scene means "events that occur over one period of time at one setting in response to one character's intention." If your writing jumps in time, you have broken the scene. If it jumps to another setting, you have broken the scene. If you jump from one character's intentions to another, you have broken the scene.

My preferred definition of a scene is a bit of a cliché in writing circles, but it gets right to the heart of fiction: **Scene** is conflict. A **story arc** defines the sweep of events from beginning to end. A **character arc** defines character change and growth over time. And a **scene arc** defines when an irresistible force meets an unmovable object.

Scenes have a structure that is the microcosm of a whole book's dramatic structure. A point-of-view character communicates an intention or goal and acts on it. Opposition to repeated efforts to reach the

goal define the scene arc, resulting in the point-of-view character's success or failure at the end of the scene. The purpose of scenes is to move the protagonist closer to the *story goal*, i.e., to advance the plot.

According to the late Jack Bickham, who has written at length about scene structure (see resource box on page 128), scenes should end not only with success or failure to reach a stated goal, they should end with a disaster or surprise related to the goal.

Omitting the goal or leaving it unclear are among the common scene-writing mistakes. If you ask your reader to follow a character into a setting for no clear reason, at a particular time, and then "stuff happens," the reader cannot gauge whether the responses fit the character's intentions. When many things happen, the author puts upon the reader the burden of faith that he will reveal the significance of the events. However, this kind of incidental, or episodic, writing often loses dramatic power through lack of suspense.

Because scenes are so obviously linked to plot and movement, many writers have made the mistake of assuming that is all that scenes are. When viewpoint characters encounter blocks that prevent them from reaching scene goals, they are forced to formulate new strategies for reaching them. That process, along with their reactions about the opposition, facilitates character development.

Fully and correctly developed scenes are also filled with "subtext." *Subtext* refers to everything that goes on below the surface of a character's scene goal and action. Subtext contains the unspoken intentions, emotions, and reactions that are often unplanned by the viewpoint character. Subtext corresponds to the character level of the scene in the same way that scene structure corresponds to the plot. Inner and outer. Often, subtext supplies more tension and reader suspense than outer scene action, perhaps because what is unacknowledged or unspoken is, indeed, powerful.

Identify the subtext—what's going on beneath the surface—in the following excerpt from Steven Barnes's novel of alternate history called *Lion's Blood*. The point of view is Aidan, a young boy who watches his mother, Deirdre, and his father, Mahon, as they tie up their boat.

CRAFT BOOKS RELATED TO INTERNAL STORY STRUCTURE

***Writing and Selling Your Novel*, by Jack Bickham**

***Scene and Structure*, by Jack Bickham**

***How to Tell a Story*, by Peter Rubie & Gary Provost**

***Plot*, by Ansen Dibell**

***A Novelist's Essential Guide to Crafting Scenes*, by Raymond Obstfeld**

***Building Fiction*, by Jesse Lee Kercheval**

Without a wasted motion, his mother tied up the line, then extended a hand to Mahon, who jumped up on the dock and gathered her in his arms for a lusty kiss. "Fire's waiting for you," she said when they came up for air.

"Good woman," Mahon said happily. "My feet are cold."

She tilted her head sideways. "Is that all need's warming?" She said this last part with her voice dropping, huskiness flowing into it like warm honey. Aidan hopped up on the pier and tied up his own line, carefully ignoring the exchange.

Or appearing to. He peeked around under his arm as Mahon placed one fond hand on Deirdre's stomach. "Not enough to have one in the oven?" he asked.

Of course, the tension beneath the surface is sexual innuendo. What's on the surface is a simple action, the tying up of a boat and the welcome by a mother of her husband and son. Which grabs your attention more—the action or the subtext? Naturally, the sexual tension. Subtext is one of the most powerful, and least recognized, tools in your fiction tool kit.

BUILDING SCENE AND STRUCTURE

Simply put, scene structure progresses from a goal, expressed by a POV character, who runs into opposition, which creates conflict. The scene ends when he reaches his goal—or not—and encounters a twist or disaster. This bare-bones outline—goal, conflict, disaster—ensures outwardly suspenseful scenes. If you take yet another step and use the device of a "scene card" to add more ribs to the outline prior to writing the scene, including notes about subtext, you'll have a fail-safe mechanism to guide your writing. Use note cards, files in your software, or an outline provided with a fiction-writing program such as Writer's Software Companion. You can add other notations as reminders relative to your character's story yearning, strength, weakness, and step in the journey, in addition to the outline for the scene structure.

Here is the basic structure for constructing the outer structure (scene) and inner structure (subtext) for your story.

Outer Scene Structure

1. Select one character as the star for the scene, using only this one viewpoint per scene.
2. Let your point-of-view character reveal, reiterate, or make obvious his or her outer goal or intention.
3. Show your character in action pursuing that goal.
4. Oppose these efforts with antagonists or other obstacles.
5. Show your character regrouping, developing a new strategy to reach the same goal, and then taking action to succeed.
6. Oppose this action.
7. Regroup, new strategy.

8. Oppose—and so forth as many times as your story demands.
9. Show your character reaching the goal or knowing that he or she will not be able to.
10. End the scene with a reversal related to the story goal—a disaster, twist, or surprise.

Look at almost any novel written by one of your favorite authors and notice the scene structure. On your scene card, also outline the subtextural scene structure for your viewpoint character's inner intentions:

Inner Story Subtext

1. Source of conflict for subtext, such as sexual attraction or repulsion, environmental forces, character weakness, or yearning that threatens to overshadow or overrule the outer scene goal.
2. Use viewpoint character's thoughts, feelings, and reactions to reveal subtextural tension.
3. Build subtextural tension as scene progresses.
4. Decide whether to let the subtext break the surface of the scene in any way. If not, use it to foreshadow a future scene.
5. Decide if the subtext will supply any portion of the disaster or twist at the scene end.

For example, bestselling author Jayne Ann Krentz offers a great example of outer and inner scene structure in her novel, *Light in Shadow*. Zoe, an interior decorator who uses feng shui, has a sixth sense for picking up the emotions that have been absorbed into walls. As the story opens, she has just toured a client's home where the bed-

rooms walls have screamed of the agonizing death of Zoe's client's ex-wife.

Inadequate subtext means underdeveloped characterization, one of the most common weaknesses in unpublished stories.

In chapter two, Zoe confides in her friend and decides to hire a private investigator to find the ex-wife or determine that she was murdered. Because no one answers her phone call to the firm (opposition to goal, suspense), as chapter three begins, she swings by the nearby address with the intention of deciding if she will hire this investigator. What follows is an analysis of the scene structure, inner and subtextural, of this chapter.

Zoe's story is conveyed in the third-person viewpoint. Her goal is clear from the end of the prior chapter—to meet the investigator, find out if she can hire him to investigate the whereabouts or fate of her new client's ex-wife. To hire him, she needs three things—to know that he is available, to assure herself of his qualifications, and to make sure he is affordable.

Krentz shows her deft hand beginning subtextural tension with the first line of the chapter and the last line of the first paragraph: "Zoe's bright bubble of optimism threatened to burst when she turned the corner into Cobalt Street. . . . Here on Cobalt Street there was a dated, slightly seedy air."

The reader sees Zoe push past hesitations as she enters an older building and mounts creaky old stairs to Truax Investigations, on the top floor (low-level environmental tension, i.e., subtext). No one is in the outer office, which has boxes of books and office supplies, as if someone is moving (implied opposition—he may not be available). She meets Ethan Truax and feels wary of his voice and manner (subtextural conflict). Her sixth sense and knowledge of feng shui supply a mixed bag—the emotions are fine but the office blocks the "chi" energy (subtext).

When she learns he has just moved from L.A. to take over his uncle's business and does not have the connections in the community she'd hoped for, she is hesitant (opposition to goal: he may not be qualified). He won't immediately answer her question about the cost

of his services (opposition). She feels somehow trapped by Ethan, and she is wary of her sense of his commanding air (subtext: conflict and attraction). As they converse, they argue and irritate each other (opposition externally and subtextural tension). When he mocks her interest in the ex-wife, assuming Zoe has a romantic interest in her client, Zoe's blood boils and she almost leaves (opposition to goal).

She finally alters her strategy by letting him believe that she has a romantic interest in her client, just so they can get on with the terms of his work for her. They continue to bicker through his processing of her credit card (conflict).

She has hired him and reached her scene goal. However, the twist is that the subtext of the sexual chemistry (irritation, but unacknowledged attraction) rises to the surface. Despite herself, she looks at his hand to see if he wears a ring (he doesn't) and hates that she is speculating on his marital status (foreshadowing).

The final twist is minor. He stops her from leaving by saying: "That's my pen you're walking off with in your bag. Mind giving it back? I'm trying to keep a lid on overhead and office expenses."

A novice writer might hurry through this simple and common event of a character hiring a P.I. If so, they might include external scene structure but reach the goal too quickly. Most of the time, writers fail to develop the undertow of subtext. Inadequate subtext means underdeveloped characterization, one of the most common weaknesses in unpublished stories.

Jayne Ann Krentz takes about 3,500 words to develop this scene. This is a substantial amount of pages to raise the narrative tension through outer conflict to Zoe's scene goal and to develop the interpersonal conflict between the two characters' personalities. Because this is an early scene in her novel and the outer goal has low stakes, the subtext is all-important as a source of conflict and narrative tension. Often, the unspoken, what lies beneath the surface, can offer a powerful source of tension and therefore increase reader interest.

Sequels

We've become accustomed to a general use of the word *sequel* to mean a second or third knockoff of a movie (e.g., *Rocky II*), or a subsequent novel in a series (e.g., *The Babysitters Club* #4015 or *Harry Potter* #5). The literary use of the term *sequel* means "what comes after in a sequence." Used technically for fiction writers, *sequel* refers to a character's reaction to a scene. Jack Bickham, and his predecessor Dwight Swain, outlined four steps to the sequel:

1. emotion
2. a quandary over what to do
3. a decision
4. action based on the decision

Sequels show the way that characters process their emotions and seek solutions for problems raised at the end of a scene. Sequels show how a character sorts out strategies and chooses a next step. That next step suggests the next scene goal that will propel the outer story toward the climax, where the story problem will be resolved. The decision made in the sequel will also propel the inner story, which leads to a character fulfilling his or her story yearning. Remember, the protagonist's inner story propels the outer story and not vice versa.

Sequels in particular develop characterization. You get to expose your viewpoint characters' emotions and range of emotions and show how they think and reach decisions. During the quandary part of a sequel, you may include thoughts about past events, or you may create a full-blown flashback scene from the past—a scene within a sequel. Bringing in the past also develops character depth and reinforces the character's yearning and motivation. Sequels are similar to the process of forming a new strategy in scene structure, only they are fully fleshed out.

In the Krentz story, after Zoe picks up the violent emotions at her client's house, she discusses her *feelings* with her friend Arcadia, as

they share a bite to eat. In a *quandary* about what to do, Zoe suspects murder or some other violence to the ex-wife. She has no evidence, nothing to take to law enforcement other than what the walls told her. They consider options and arrive at the *decision* to hire a private investigator to find the ex-wife or discover that she is missing. Once they reach a decision, they get a phone book and call a private investigator, thus *acting* on the decision. The sequel sets up the next scene with the clear scene goal—to hire an investigator.

Fully developed scenes may span entire chapters, as did the one described above in Krentz's *Light in Shadow*. Sequels may also involve whole chapters, as did her chapter two when Zoe meets her friend to tell her what she felt inside the client's bedroom.

You need to know that not every scene is followed with a four-part sequel. That pattern would become boring: scene, sequel, scene, sequel, etc. The creative aspect of fiction writing is to make constant decisions about what comes next: Should you build momentum and drama by writing three scenes back to back and then offer one sequel? What is typical for your kind of writing? Obviously, action-oriented, plot-driven stories have far more scenes, sometimes eighty to ninety percent, and far fewer sequels than character-driven stories. Once again, study the kinds of writing you most wish to write and note the proportion and pattern of scenes to sequels.

Shortcuts

Because of the quantity of pages involved in full development of scenes and sequels, the pace is necessarily slower, even if the dramatic tension stays high. Sometimes, a writer needs to pick up the pace. *Shortcuts* are a combination of scene and sequel. They often feature fast-paced dialogue with the viewpoint character's reactions (feelings, thoughts, strategies, decisions) worked in.

In Krentz's same novel, all of her setup is finished by page fifty-

eight when chapter six begins. From this chapter on, the blended scene/sequel, which is what I'm defining as "shortcut," is used more often than either a scene or sequel alone.

The key to writing an effective shortcut involves four guidelines:

1. ***Keep it short.*** A partial page, a few pages, or a short chapter.
2. ***Involve physical movement.*** Zoe gets out of bed, goes to the kitchen to put water on for tea, and then sees the paper, while talking on the phone the whole time.
3. ***Involve emotional movement.*** While sharing with Arcadia, Zoe processes her own conclusions about the passionate night before with Ethan. In a subtle way, she raises and dismisses the prospect of anything lasting.
4. ***Include subtext.*** Keep a source of beneath-the-surface intrigue and tension. In this chapter, Zoe and Arcadia allude to a past but don't tell the reader:

> "I can't believe I did it, Arcadia. I haven't been interested in a man since—" She broke off. "You know."
>
> "I know."

Later the women share relief that the newspaper article about the apprehension of Zoe's client made no mention of them. By this time in the plot, we know that Zoe and Arcadia have secrets in their pasts; they have assumed new identities and fled a past situation. But the reader doesn't yet know the details. The allusion to a problematic past raises questions and fuels reader curiosity.

Shortcuts are economical and a valuable technique, but they do not replace scenes or sequels when you are able to slow the pace or when you need to anchor the reader's involvement in deeper characterization. In general, begin using shortcuts after you have established your story's setup.

JUMP-CUTS

A relative of the shortcut is the jump-cut. The term *jump-cut* refers to skipping interim action and jumping to a new time or location for a next scene or sequel. Let's say your characters talk on Friday about meeting again next Tuesday. Instead of showing what they did between Friday and Tuesday, you can keep the pace moving and the dramatic tension high by making a jump-cut to Tuesday. You risk jarring the reader with a jump-cut, so you also need to use transitional phrases. In this example, that phrase might be "On Tuesday." This short clause is a form of "segue;" it eases the transition from a prior time and place to the new one.

Segues

Segue means transition. Every short story and novel has need of pieces of scenes, pieces of sequel, and simply "business" to supply smooth transition between story elements. One such recurring story element is the transition between chapters. In *Mystic River*, by Dennis Lahane, chapter one ends with young Jimmy reflecting on the disappearance of another boy, Dave. Read the end of chapter one and the first line of chapter two—the segue—as follows:

> You felt different when something was stolen as opposed to simply replaced. You felt it in your chest that it was never coming back. That's how he felt about Dave. . . . Too bad, too, because Jimmy had liked Dave, although he couldn't put his finger on why most times. Just something about the kid, maybe the way he'd always been there, even if half the time you didn't notice him.
>
> As it turned out, Jimmy was wrong. Dave Boyle returned to the neighborhood four days after he'd disappeared.

Sometimes a character will mull things over while driving to a next location and scene, but the mulling isn't a complete sequel.

Other times, you may have a page of dialogue or narration that is without the shaping of a scene, yet the information moves the story forward to a fully developed scene.

Let's look again at Lahane's *Mystic River*. In chapter two he uses a one-paragraph segue of narration to indicate the passage of time and to succinctly reveal the effects of Dave Boyle's return after being lost.

> For a few days, Dave Boyle became a minor celebrity, and not just in the neighborhood, but throughout the state. The headline the next morning in the *Record American* read LITTLE BOY LOST/LITTLE BOY FOUND. The photograph above the fold showed Dave sitting on his stoop, his mother's thin arms draped across his chest, a bunch of smiling kids from the Flats mugging for the camera on either side of Dave and his mother, everyone looking just happy as can be, except for Dave's mother, who looked like she'd just missed her bus on a cold day.

Some writers don't realize that they not only can have these segues but that they should have them. Without segues, writing can be awkward with nothing but scenes and sequels. Not every piece of information, character goal, or character emotion deserves development. Often, you simply need to get your character from location A to B in a physical or emotional sense, but you don't want the abruptness of a jump-cut. Segues are the answer.

Set Pieces

Most short stories are long enough for a dramatic event at the beginning of the story and a climactic one at the end. Only an extra long story will have room for the setup to yet bigger dramatic events.

In contrast, novels *need* many events of high dramatic intensity. Otherwise, an emotional monotony will reduce overall suspense. If a writer is doing his job, the obstacles grow increasingly more difficult as a protagonist pursues the high-stakes story goal. The image of a slope

or hill captures the buildup of difficulty that periodically culminates in a high point and partial release, only to build again toward a yet higher intensity scene, until reaching the highest one, the climax.

These high points—whether crises or triumphal scenes—are variously called *set pieces* or "big scenes." Any of life's major passages can, in a novel, become set pieces, events like births, deaths, weddings, funerals, anniversaries, reunions, and departures.

However, *any* event can be designated as a set piece, a big scene, by a writer who wants or needs it to be of higher dramatic intensity than the rest of the scenes in a book. How do you decide?

One of the characteristics of a set piece, different from any other scene, is that it alters the direction of the story toward the same story goal. The protagonist or main characters understand something about themselves and their quest that makes it obvious that they must alter their course. In *Lonesome Dove*, by Larry McMurtry, the attack by water moccasins in the first river crossing that results in the death of Sean qualifies as a set piece. When young Newt grieves over Sean's body, older and wiser Gus tells him the death wasn't his fault. It's best to put Sean's death behind him and live for the moment. This event and Gus's advice sober the cowboys and make them realize that the trail ride to Montana is not a lark; it will have perils that will claim yet more lives. The story continues toward the same story goal—going to Montana—but the cowboys' awareness of life and death has changed.

Your job as a fiction writer is to draw your reader ever more deeply into your story. If your scenes have approximately the same level of dramatic intensity, you'll either fail to hold your reader, or you'll miss a chance to make them rave about your writing. The set pieces define crescendos of drama, finally cresting at your story's climax.

I first learned of set-piece structure from *Plot*, by Ansen Dibell. As I worked with writers and edited their novels, we tested set-piece structure. Here are the steps in this tremendous plotting device:

1. ***Name the Set Piece.*** Let your point-of-view characters begin to talk about the event that will become a set piece. Maybe they talk about "the birthday party," "the launch,"

or "the invasion." As soon as your characters begin to talk about a future set piece, you build reader anticipation or possibly dread. This form of foreshadowing is far more effective than surprise, where the reader's emotions follow an event rather than build toward it.

2. ***Preview the Set Piece.*** This second step asks you to create a scene or interaction that mimics the coming set piece in its content, style, or emotions. For instance, in a romance, a first touch previews a first kiss, or a first kiss previews first lovemaking. If a character will die in the set piece, show him being injured or threatened as your preview. The preview directly foreshadows the set piece.

3. ***Contrast the Set Piece.*** In a scene or shortcut immediately prior to the set piece, create a contrasting tone, interaction, or event from what is coming next. This step sets up a reversal, which serves to make the set piece stand out even more. For instance, if your hero plans to propose and that is going to be the set-piece scene, perhaps he and his beloved can have a tiff or even a full-blown argument. If your protagonist will be involved in a horrific battle and will lose his best friend, then a contrasting scene could be the two of them sharing a tender and funny memory.

4. ***The Set Piece.*** The actual set piece is a scene, with full scene structure, ending with a disaster or surprise. Because you have foreshadowed the set piece with the prior three steps, you need to create greater impact with it than for prior scenes. This means you must develop setting details, physical sensations of the point-of-view character, and immediate emotional reactions by the characters to the unfolding events. Show the "turns" when emotions and decisions shift and reverse, and make sure you bring out the shifting emotional truths and needs of the protagonist and main characters.

Decide what primary emotion you wish your readers to have at the climax of the set piece. Do you want them to cry their eyes out? Feel kicked in the stomach? Notice every nerve ending standing at attention? If you want your readers to have an intense reaction, as they should, make sure you develop the details of action and reaction, thoughts and feelings, and implications as the set piece progresses.

5. ***Sequel and Realization.*** High drama calls for a full "debriefing" of what has happened, beginning with the greater emotions that must be present after a big scene. As your characters assimilate the change brought by the set piece, reveal their partial realization of truth about their inner yearning and its relation to the wound from their past. Let this moment of understanding lead to the decision to change directions as the protagonist continues pressing for resolution of the problem of the story. The story goal remains unchanged and you may even show a greater urgency to reach it, but in a different way than before.

Lonesome Dove displays many terrific examples of set piece structure. The river crossing where Sean dies begins with the first step in the set piece. In the first chapter, Gus and Call discuss "the first river crossing." They name the coming set piece and talk about it throughout the beginning of the novel. They decide to rustle some cattle from the Mexicans across the border, across the Rio Grande, and this crossing acts as a preview. As they make their return, Newt nearly slips off his horse, risking death by the stampeding cattle, perhaps foreshadowing Sean's death. (In the movie, the writers made Sean nearly fall, a more overt preview.)

The cowboys are in a euphoric mood after the successful cattle theft. When they do, at last, begin the cattle drive to Montana, everyone is elated. The day before the crossing, a sandstorm followed by lightning and a downpour again heightens the danger. In Newt's point of view, he struggles to stay on his horse, Mouse, and make it to

safety. (In the movie, the cowboys party the night before—sharing drinks, jokes, and anticipation of the adventure ahead.)

In the novel, the contrasting mood occurs just prior to the set piece of Sean's death:

> Just before the men reached the river they came out into a clearing a mile or more wide. It was a relief, after the constant battle with the mesquite and chaparral. . . . Dish uncoiled his rope and made a few practice throws at a low mesquite seedling. Then he even took a throw, for a joke, at a low-flying buzzard that had just risen off the carcass of an armadillo.

As the crossing begins, McMurtry writes: "When they reached the river it seemed that it was going to be the smoothest crossing possible." In the movie, the viewer shares the amusement of watching the pigs swim across the river. They see the cowboys laughing at the sight. The set piece begins with the lead bull named Old Dog following the character Deats. Just as Newt crosses, Sean, behind him, stirs a water-moccasin nest. They attack him and, shortly after he is dragged onto the bank, he dies.

In the movie, the final interchange between Gus and Newt over Sean's death constitutes the realization and turning point. In the novel, Gus says the final words at Sean's burial: "There's accidents in life and he met with a bad one. We may all do the same if we ain't careful. Dust to dust," he said. "Let's the rest of us go on to Montana." From this point forward, the cowboys, especially Newt, are no longer naïve. The trip to Montana *is* life. Others will die on the trail, and now, they will be more careful than carefree.

When you plan your novel, or work on its revision, identify your set pieces and outline the structure that will ensure the maximum possible dramatic payoff. When you read stories or books in your genre, identify the steps in the set pieces, and notice how many the authors use. Movies are also great ways to learn about set pieces. They have at least three of them—at the end of Act I, Act II, and Act III.

Look for opportunities to get double duty from your set-piece

setup. This means to plan the contrasting scene for one set piece to become at the same time the preview scene of a set piece yet to come. Maybe your big scene itself becomes a preview to another set piece. The more interwoven the uses of your foreshadowing, generally speaking, the tighter the writing and the more dramatic the effect for a reader.

LET the Six Sherpas carry your burden up the mountain, offering you the right tool at the right moment for your needs. They are indispensable for the internal writing you do between point A and point B and onward to the summit, point Z, the last page of your story.

Every fiction writer struggles with getting the reader oriented in place and time. Yet another skill is knowing how to write about place—the outer environment and inside settings, including the markers that reflect era, time, and season. And every writer struggles with orienting the reader to characters—who they are, what they look like, and what has happened in the long ago and immediate past. How to narrate and describe is the subject of the next chapter.

NINE

Narration and Visuals: Setting, Description, and Imagery

A place belongs forever to whoever claims it hardest, remembers it most obsessively, wrenches it from itself, shapes it, renders it, loves it so radically that he remakes it in his own image.

Joan Didion

MANY YEARS AGO, before Lasik surgery was approved by the FDA, I traveled to Vancouver, Canada, to have the procedure. As the laser reshaped my cornea, while my eyelid was clamped open, I experienced an ancient terror. I believe my animal brain—some have called it the reptilian brain—knew beyond doubt that without vision, I would die. Yet, my modern brain argued and pleaded through the fifty-six-second surgery that this attack on the eye was a good thing. My animal brain knew better. After the laser had finished carving both eyes, I could not move or speak. I felt as if I was experiencing the shock of an animal who believes it is going to die.

The visual sense in Homo sapiens is primary. As writers, we are our readers' eyes. Through us, they visualize the setting, characters, and events, and in their mind's eye, readers connect images with emotions and realize an event's literal, as well as its symbolic, meaning.

Some would argue that the most artistic writers stimulate the

reader to supply most of the visuals based on a minimum of words. I would argue that the minimalist style is no better or worse than any other. Some writers offer rich development of visuals. There is room for everyone.

As an editor, I see minimalist efforts that fall far short of Papa Hemingway's deft spartan style. I also see purple prose that would make Faulkner roll over in his grave. On the whole, though, most aspiring writers err on the side of too few visuals, especially ones selected for specificity, impact, and meaning.

Specificity and Impact

A writer's job with setting is to make it so vivid that readers believe the place exists and remember it like their last actual trip to New York or Hawaii or Minneapolis. A writer's job with character description is to make it so unique that readers believe these imaginary persons exist and to remember them like friends not seen for years.

Specificity in description of setting or characterization is accomplished by avoidance of cliché, selection of concrete nouns, and creation of an original perspective. In the following passage from *Winterkill*, by Craig Lesley, notice what visuals give you a firm sense of place:

> Both the sky above the garage and the flat water of Celilo Lake had taken on a slate-gray color. The old village with its salmon-drying shacks and Wy-Am longhouse was gone now that the dam's backwaters had covered Celilo Falls and ended the fishing. Tommy Thompson's home was gone too. The old chief had painted his east door a bright salmon color to catch the sun's first rays each morning.
>
> Yellow corrugated plastic sealed the east end of the new cedar-shake longhouse, and the same plastic covered the peak of the roof, although it had been nailed on earlier and had become faded with passing time. . . . Beside the longhouse, a utility pole had a lead wire strung to a bright blue-and-white Pepsi machine.

The images that strike me from Lesley's description of setting are these: Celilo Lake, slate-gray, salmon-drying shacks, old chief Tommy Thompson, east door a bright salmon color, catch the sun's first rays, yellow corrugated plastic, new cedar-shake longhouse, nailed on faded plastic, utility pole, lead wire strung to a bright blue-and-white Pepsi machine.

Lesley guides my mind's eye to the visuals that bring home the contrast between a former thriving Indian village and one that has been neglected and imposed upon with modern "conveniences"—corrugated yellow plastic and a bright blue-and-white Pepsi machine. The combination of all the visuals not only provides the reader with a clear sense of a place but also delivers a mood and meaning—I feel sad about the loss of an intact culture, distressed over the displacement of people and the incursion of the bright, cheery, Pepsi machine.

Less experienced writers often hurry through the setting or character description, perhaps taking half or three-quarters fewer words than Lesley used. But it is not quantity of description that dissuades a reader. Readers stay engaged by the specificity, impact, and meaning of those images.

Most stories establish a season. Often the weather contributes to the veracity of a scene. As in all description, when you use the point-of-view character's experience of it, the description becomes characterization. Adding the character's visceral experience intensifies the reader's feeling of "being there." Read this next selection from *The Jump-Off Creek*, by Molly Gloss, and note the specificity and the added impact of the visuals through use of sensory detail.

> In October the weather for the most part stayed clear and windy. It was very cold at night, and whenever the wind fell away, the grass in the mornings was frozen hard, painted white with rime. She had no instinct yet for the weather in this country, and when it clouded over she looked for snow. But under the low overcast the air warmed and only a little rain fell, making no sound at all, puddling in the dead brown prints her boots had tracked on the frozen grass.

When you look at this paragraph, the beginning of chapter thirty-three, it offers substantial development of one aspect of the character's experience—the weather. However, the slowing down of time to become more specific about the unfamiliar weather helps the reader settle in and notice it as well. The images that struck me were sensory—windy, cold, warmed, no sound—and visual—grass frozen hard, painted white with rime, clouded over, low overcast, dead brown prints her boots had tracked. I experienced the greatest emotional impact from "dead brown prints her books had tracked in the frozen grass." Without knowing anything more about the story, I absorb a deeper meaning from this image.

Relevant and Organic

It's one thing to describe well, and it's another thing to include narration that is relevant to the plot and characterization and to write it in a way that is organic rather than seeming to be imposed upon the scene.

When asked what they tend to skip in reading fiction, most readers will say things like "the boring parts," "the description," "the history and backstory," or "the author's philosophizing." Each of these is a form of narration; every writer has to learn how to tell well.

Imagine you're taking an all-day bus ride, and you sit down in the only vacant seat, next to a person who loves to talk. Almost immediately, he starts in and before long you've heard about his kids, grandkids, his last operation, his deceased wife, what he likes and doesn't like to eat, and his opinion on politics. How long before you are ready to pull out your hair? Or get off at the next town, no matter how far that leaves you from your destination?

This seatmate's disclosures weren't asked for and weren't relevant. The writers in the examples in this book have learned how to provide the reader with information, description, or backstory on a need-to-know basis. It's especially tempting to intrude as the writer and brief

RESOURCES ON HOW TO TELL WELL

***Description*, by Monica Wood**

***Setting*, by Jack H. Bickham**

***Voice & Style*, by Johnny Payne**

***Creating Short Fiction*, by Damon Knight**

***Technique in Fiction*, by Robie MacAuley and George Lanning**

the reader at the beginning of stories. The siren that most draws writers to crash into the rocks is narration in the first few pages. Your readers are willing to wait to have many, if not most, questions answered. Most of all, they want to get oriented and discover what's at stake for whom.

Returning to your bus trip, what if the old man seated next to you is a quiet fellow, but polite? Shortly after you sit down, he offers you his hand to shake and says, "I'm Roger." You shake his hand and introduce yourself, and then fall back into silence. After awhile, one of you might see something outside the window and comment or perhaps ask about each other's destinations. In other words, you get acquainted and, over a really long bus trip, you're likely to get into progressively longer and more personal conversations. If you find enough in common, you may make a lifelong friend. The entire experience will have an organic feeling to it as it has emerged in an unforced way over time.

Impact and Meaning

I'll never forget being a high-school freshman and trying to convince my dad that the wall in Robert Frost's poem, "Mending Wall," had symbolic meaning. "Don't you see, Dad," I pleaded a half-hour into

the discussion, "the wall is a symbol for the differences that divide people?" "A wall is a wall," he answered. "If it's got a hole in it, it's a good thing they are going to repair it."

I felt as if I were hitting my head against a wall—in the literal and figurative meaning of the word. Words are symbols and symbols have meaning. Specific words, like *wall*, used in specific contexts can evoke meanings that would take many more words to explain in abstractions.

Whether or not you intend what you write to have double, i.e., symbolic, meanings, it will. So you might as well control the meaning toward what you want your reader to experience and understand.

What things recur in your story? Colors? Temperatures or seasons? Make a list of each, writing down nouns for things. Then group like items together. If a symbolic meaning jumps out at you, make groupings based on meanings. For instance, one of my students wrote a speculative mystery about a woman who became a renegade doctor's first human cryogenic experiment—unbeknownst to her. The writer intentionally used cold, ice, and frozen imagery, not only because that matches cryogenics but because her protagonist's pre-gunshot personality had been unfeeling and frigid. In contrast, the writer describes the red leaves of fall, the protagonist's red hair, and uses images of fire to symbolically represent life, vitality, and responsiveness.

Another student wrote a short story that had two cars in it. One car, belonging to the aged parents, was old and in need of repair or the junkyard. The father tried, without success, to repair the old junker, while his wife grew sicker and sicker, and finally died. The second car belonged to the son. You guessed it; his car was a new model, shiny, purring like a happy kitten. Father and son had several interactions over the cars, and the son ultimately drove the father to the hospital—to say his goodbyes—in his newer car. The cars became symbols of meaning that paralleled and echoed the passage of time and youth. Cars mean a great deal in our society—and so does youth. The story was richer for the use of this symbolic imagery.

Chances are you will not have assigned meaning to your things, colors, temperature, or weather prior to writing your stories. Once you start rereading your writing with this in mind, you can make

changes that will strengthen your stories. For instance, let's suppose that most of your story takes place at night, but you have two scenes that take place on a bright sunny day. What might night mean? How about that bright sunny day? If what your protagonist seeks remains hidden, intentionally or merely out of confusion, using night for these scenes would be a good symbolic match. But what if you have one scene of confusion that takes place at high noon? If you cannot build a justification for the contrast, perhaps you should reset the scene at night, reserving daytime and a sunny day for the protagonist's discovery of what he seeks.

SIMILES AND METAPHORS

When you write similes and metaphors, stay aware of your symbols and what you want them to mean. Weed out those that don't belong in the garden. Replace them with strong starts that can grow tall and bear fruit. Make sure your imagery matches the background of your protagonist—family, living situation, and career—and also matches the emotional tone and thrust of the plot.

Master of imagery, Dean Koontz, created a dark story in *Seize the Night*, told through the point of view of Christopher Snow, a young man who suffers from XP, xeroderma pigmentosum, a genetic disorder that "renders me highly vulnerable to skin and eye cancers caused by exposure to *any* ultraviolet radiation. Sunshine. Incandescent or fluorescent bulbs. The shining idiot face of a television screen." What better protagonist to be the go-between from the world of light and good to the world of dark and evil?

Even this sketch is full of potential for symbolism and also for complications and conflict in the plot. Here are a few of Koontz's images from this novel, where mutant creatures come out at night, then disappear back into a man-made catacomb underground:

> I hung like a spider on an obsessively well-organized web. I had no intention of gobbling up unwary flies and moths, but the longer I remained suspended in the gloom, the more I felt that I was not the

spider, after all, not the diner but the dinner, and that a mutant tarantula as big as an elevator cab was ascending from the pit below, its sharp mandibles silently scissoring.

Consider the entirely different use of imagery from *Icy Sparks*, a first novel by Southern writer Gwyn Hyman Rubio, in the viewpoint of a character with Tourette's syndrome:

But I still remember my daddy—how all his life his eyes bulged forward when he talked, like a dam holding back a flood of words, corking everything inside, so afraid he was of the vacancy left behind should all his thoughts be spoken.

I could feel little invisible rubber bands fastened to my eyelids, pulled tight through my brain, and attached to the back of my head. Every few seconds, a crank behind my skull turned slowly. With each turn, the rubber bands yanked harder, and the space inside my head grew smaller.

Using the imagery of similes and metaphors and building the symbolic power of your descriptions adds artistic value and emotional power to your writing. They give you extra points in original style from the Eastern Bloc judge on the Olympic publishing team.

Most writers underwrite when it comes to creating imagery. I advise two remedies: 1) Read and write poetry; 2) Let yourself go. Start with similes, comparing one thing in terms of another, using the words *as* or *like*. For instance, "blue as . . . ," or "round like . . ." Book editor Lorin Oberweger, through her company Free Expressions, recommends that her students and clients develop their abilities at creating similes by filling in the blanks of the following "style stretchers," as she calls them:

Black as _____
Cold as _____
Rich as _____
Eyes as blue as _____

Hair like _____
Tall as _____
Arms like _____
Calm as _____
Her heart beat like _____

You can easily see how you can use these prompts as a jump-off for practicing on all the colors, parts of the body, temperatures, physical attributes, and emotions. After you have supplied a word or two, stretch yourself further and write a full sentence or two that extends the comparison or image. Lorin further recommends that you "list five or ten 'automatic' or clichéd responses. Then list five to ten 'fresh' responses, digging for original and inventive language." She adds, "Feel free to exaggerate, to get silly, to go for comparisons that don't quite hold up to literal scrutiny."

Further, just as you aim for specificity, impact, and meaning in your writing of your characters and story, also aim for the same while creating imagery. V. C. Andrews models superb examples of squeezing more juice out of an image in her novel *Misty*: "Daddy tries to keep the bills down . . . but whenever he [asks why], Mommy waves his opinions in my face like a bullfighter with a red flag, crying 'See how much he thinks of you?' " Or another: "You're like some wildflower growing out of the garden, untended, left to fend for yourself most of the time, to pray for the right amount of rain and sunshine because no one's there to water and nurture you."

Because our visual sense is so prominent, your imagery, as in "image," may also emphasize what can be seen. However, stretch your imagination and your writing skill and gradually develop your literal and symbolic imagery for sounds, smells, taste, and touch. While a gifted few writers may experience a flow of similes, metaphors, and symbols as constant as Niagara Falls, know that the rest of us—I would wager 99 percent—work hard on enhancing our writing through many revisions.

First write your story or novel and take what comes. Then revise 'til the cows come home.

TEN

Finding Your Gait

Human life itself may be almost pure chaos, but the work of the artist—the only thing he's good for—is to take these handfuls of confusion and disparate things, things that seem to be irreconcilable, and put them together in a frame to give them some kind of shape and meaning. Even if it's only his view of a meaning. That's what he's for—to give his view of life.

Katherine Anne Porter

LET'S SUPPOSE YOU'RE going on vacation. You'll be gone several weeks and plan to drive cross country and visit some of the national parks in the West. In fact, you've tossed in backpacks, sleeping bags, and freeze-dried food, just in case you do some hiking and camping.

All kinds of things may happen, including but not limited to car breakdown, construction delays, detours, food poisoning, sickness, closed parks, losing your money, sunburn, insect infestations, animal bites, animal attacks, taking wrong roads or trails, getting lost, forgetting the matches, running out of food, getting robbed, suffering injuries, forest fires, violent storms, flash floods, snow, hail, sandstorms, hypothermia, being attacked, family emergencies back home, and dying. You might even forget to remember this list and then what might happen?!

If you are an experienced traveler, you'll plan for many of these

possibilities. Once you've begun the journey, you'll adapt and probably enjoy having some great stories to tell later. Likewise, everything prior to this chapter was designed to help you get your bearings and create a map for writing any story, short or long. Even so, you're going to run into the unexpected in the middle of your story, especially in a project as big as writing a novel. A minor character might take over, or you may have selected the wrong character for protagonist. You may decide to add a subplot or delete a major part of your primary plot. You might realize a problem with story logic, competing themes, or any number of unexpected changes.

Many writers flounder when they move into writing the vast middle of their stories. How can you prepare for these unexpected contingencies? What should you throw in your pack before embarking on the journey? At the least, take a first-aid kit containing knowledge of writing methods and writing tools.

Writing Methods

When it comes to generating pages, you'll find that once again, there is no right way; there is only your way. If your way does not work, try the following writing methods that have worked for others: hot writing, meticulous writing, writing to goals, and revising while writing.

HOT WRITING

This tried and true method advises writing your first draft as quickly as you can, without stopping to revise. It assumes that you have already done your researching, planning, and outlines. When you face the blank screen, keep writing and don't stop—overcoming your desire to not finish or to get sucked into an endless loop of revision.

Hot writers I've known do produce, and I think it is a great first-draft method. They often talk about the thrill they get in creation and how much they dislike revision. And there lies the problem. Habitual hot writing is antithetical to the slower process of revision and

polish required for some manuscripts, which benefits from the next method—meticulous writing.

METICULOUS WRITING

Dean Koontz is the master of the meticulous writing method. Admittedly a perfectionist by nature, he not only revises some of his novels as many as thirty times, he has said that he frequently revises one page a dozen or more times before writing the next page.

While this method works for him, I've known plenty of writers who cannot write any other way than meticulously. The problem with this method is that the writer can end up overwriting—revising until the work loses its freshness and originality. The other problem is that the drive to perfection can prolong completion for years, decades, or a lifetime. This method can keep a writer from the exploration and experience that comes from fast production. My advice to anyone who has spent years revising the same novel is to put it aside and start a new one. In my opinion, meticulous writing is great, but only if you complete works in a reasonable time and move on.

WRITING TO GOALS

Many writers set goals such as a number of pages, words, or hours each day. You may recall an earlier mention of Phyllis Whitney, who aims for eight pages per day, six days a week, and enters her actual accomplishment in pages and word count onto her daily calendar. Because she knows that she will hit a bog, the sixth day of writing is an extra that puts pages and words in the bank, so to speak. That way, she manages the psychological disappointment that would otherwise come from falling behind.

Other writers find it simpler to set office hours and notify friends and family not to bother them during those hours. Either way, keeping track of pages, word count, or time works for anyone who does well with goal-setting.

REVISING WHILE WRITING

Many writers do at least some revision in the process of writing new pages. Many describe how revision of the prior day's work primes the pump and gets them into the work. By the time they finish revising, they feel warmed up and ready to write new material. Others write and revise in a pattern of one step forward, one step backward, throughout the work.

Mainstream literary novelist Jonis Agee combines hot writing with ongoing light revision, and she uses a method of writing that brought a collective gasp from her audience at a revision workshop she led at Pike's Peak Conference in 2002. After she does her research and preparation, she writes the first draft of her novel in a combination of writing and light revision. When she finishes draft #1, she reads it all the way through, and then *throws it away.* She writes draft #2, finishes it, reads it all the way through, and then *throws it away.* She told the audience that it is her third draft when she feels like her writing is best, the emotions authentic, and the characters come alive. When asked, she said that at most, she might save twenty to fifty pages of the drafts she throws away. Top that!

Revising while writing can be used in conjunction with hot writing or writing to goals. The only danger in revising while writing, or even revising yesterday's material prior to beginning the next section, is that you could get hung up with revision. Keep track of how much time you spend on each function, and make sure you keep forging ahead on new material at a rate that works for you.

Writing Tools

Every writer develops preferences in tools, from yellow legal pads to PalmPilots™. Beyond paper, pens, and computers, the rest of the aids in this section may make your job easier. Software programs may supply many tools for "thinking out loud" about your stories and re-

SOFTWARE PROGRAMS FOR FICTION WRITERS

Dramatica Pro, ***www.dramatica.com***

Power Writer, ***www.write-brain.com***

Power Structure, ***www.write-brain.com***

Storybase, ***www.ashleywilde.com***

StoryBuilder, ***www.svsoft.com***

StoryView, ***www.write-bros.com***

WritePro, ***www.writepro.com***

solving problems. The resource box above lists some of the software programs for writers.

Although computer software applications work for many people, keep in mind that over the decades, writers have developed many tried and true tools that cost little but your time.

SCENE CARDS

Typically on 3×5 or 4×6 note cards, scene cards allow writers to make changes in their plans simply by putting the cards in a different order. They make planning flexible. At the annual Writers Retreat Workshop, a ten-day live-in "boot camp for writers," begun by the late Gary Provost and continued by Gail Provost, participants learn how to make scene cards that cover all the events they can foresee in their entire novel, prior to beginning writing. When they begin writing, and especially when they hit what I call the "vast middle" of the book, some of the most difficult terrain, they can add, remove, or shuffle the cards as the story changes.

You can add more information than just your scene outline. Cards are handy for jotting reminders of characterization, the theme or

yearning, planned subtext, setting and visceral details, and for outlining sequels, segues, set pieces, and shortcuts.

NOVEL NOTEBOOK

Literally a three-ring binder, the novel notebook includes sections devoted to research; character worksheets or histories; setting; overall blueprints of plot; chapter summaries and synopses; outlines of scenes and other units of structure; changes or to-do lists; calendars; and a diary section for talking to yourself or to recalcitrant characters. Some novels involve so much research that one notebook is devoted to nothing but research. Once again, for some writers, establishing word-processing files for each of these sections is more comfortable than the big bulging notebook. The idea is the same.

CALENDARS

One item in the notebook deserves special mention: the calendar. Every story takes place in time—in an era, year, season, and over a period of days or weeks. Place your story events on a calendar and use it to inform your writing. Another way to increase the verisimilitude of your fiction is to differentiate weekdays from weekends, make the seasons palpable, and wrap your scenes around holidays or special observances.

STORY BOARDS

Many novelists use some variation of "story boards." The "board" may be poster board, butcher paper, or giant marker boards. The idea is to develop a visual map of your entire story. Some writers create discrete chapter divisions on their boards with the outline of the structure below the chapter titles. Others create a timeline and place the chronology of events along it. Still others create multiple story chronologies, somewhat like a conductor's score of individual instru-

ments. One line maps the primary plot and protagonist's story line, while other lines shown parallel to the primary line display the point-of-view characters' story lines and/or the subplots. I like using sticky notes of different colors and sizes mounted on a poster board. You can assign color coding according to character point-of-view, to scene vs. sequel or set piece, or to any other element of craft you wish. I also use colored marker pens in the same way.

The smallest storyboard I have ever seen was introduced by author Keith Wilson at the Writers Retreat Workshop. He showed us a manila file folder with the tiny sticky notes that can be overlapped or moved. You can have a totally portable visual display of your entire four-hundred-page novel in this handy little story board. I particularly like the idea of sticky notes, in the manila folder or on a large poster board, and scene cards. The reason is that they allow you to move things around. The disadvantage of using a marker board is that you can lose material that you erase.

DIARIES AND NOTEPADS

During the creative process of writing a short story or a novel, your mind will be constantly at work, even in your sleep. Many writers find solutions to problems and fresh ideas in their dreams. They keep a notebook and pen on a bedside table.

The story diary, as it sounds, is nothing more than a journal devoted to exploring thoughts and feelings relative to a story. It is the same as a section in the novel notebook used for the same purpose.

All writers should carry some notepad with them at all times, whether a cheap spiral-bound purse-size notepad or a sophisticated PalmPilot™. Visionary inventor and architect Buckminster Fuller once said that we have fifteen seconds in which to act on an idea before we forget it. Acting on it can include repeating it in our minds and creating some mental hook to retain it or writing it down.

SYNOPSIS

The synopsis is a protagonist-defined, theme/yearning-based, summary of your whole story. One of the most versatile tools, the synopsis is useful throughout the whole planning, writing, and marketing process. They can be as short as a paragraph in the query letter or as long as twenty pages, supplying a detailed map of a novel.

The synopsis is different from the chapter by chapter outline—it is a narrative summary of the whole story, without divisions for chapters. More than the outlines, the synopsis finds its organization from the story instead of the plot, from the unfulfilled yearning that defines the theme. Plot details in a synopsis merely show the carry-through of the theme.

I believe the synopsis is so important for staying on course that writers should not see the synopsis as optional in their planning. To me, it can become a global positioning, homing device to which you return again and again to keep heading in the right direction.

Ideally, write your first synopsis, of any length, as soon as you have mapped a whole story. When you finish writing the beginning and are planning to Cross the Threshold into the middle of your novel, revise your synopsis and expand it, if you have previously written a short version. Return to the synopsis and make adjustments as needed as you write through the middle. When you have finished your first draft, read and revise the synopsis again prior to revision and writing draft number two.

As a further resource, my book, *The Sell Your Novel Tool Kit*, offers nearly seventy pages on writing the synopsis, including three examples of five-page synopses and dozens of examples of the short form found within query examples.

The Vast Middle

Nearly everyone has encountered a "sagging middle," the portion of a story where attention lags and the reader begins to skip pages, hoping

to find where "it gets really interesting again." What causes this all-too-common experience, even in published novels by well-known authors? More to the point, how can you avoid this pitfall?

A number of skills will carry you through the story middle and ensure your readers' interest. These involve the following techniques:

- Character development
- Scene structure
- Movement
- Narration
- Pace
- Dialogue

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

As you progress through the Road of Tests and Trials, which defines the middle of the book from the viewpoint of the Hero's Journey, you will show your protagonist and other allies pressing toward reaching the story goal and running into opposition. One of the reasons these scenes can lose their luster is by coming across as the "blow by blows" of plot.

In reality, the middle of a novel is exactly where you want to intensify characterization in several ways. First, each point-of-view character's primary weakness (with its roots in the past traumatic event) should produce more, or more severe, complications in the plot. Years ago, a manuscript I worked on featured a private investigator whose strength was pit bull–like tenacity. However, her weakness was a total inability to keep her mouth shut. She told everyone her business, and that alerted the murderer to her every move. You can easily see how a weakness as a blabbermouth would create outer plot complications.

Under pressure, weaknesses may become more prominent, and you should show this in your characterization. Showing weaknesses and reaction to increased stress intensify reader involvement in your characters. Your characters' reactions also increase a reader's need to

understand completely why the character continues to be so blind to his own flaws. Whereas a flashback will weaken a novel beginning, it may illuminate and deepen a novel middle. If you have supplied small references to the backstory event where the weakness began, the middle of the book, after a set piece or scene of high drama, is a superb place to re-create the past event—but as a scene and not as narration.

Additionally, the middle is a great place to reveal more about your characters, their relationships, and the stakes should they fail to reach the story goal, especially in sequels and in subplot development.

SCENE STRUCTURE

Middles sag when readers lose their investment in the outcome of the action. Check every scene for clarity of the goal at the beginning of the scene. Make sure you develop the character dimension showing various strategies to overcome the obstacles to that goal. Check for sources of tension that are subtextural, below the surface—sources such as sexual attraction, barely restrained violence or aggression, or other emotions.

Most novels have space enough for several set pieces, the big scenes of higher dramatic impact. If one of your scenes has nearly the same level of suspense as the rest, you may unwittingly create a flat line of reader interest. You know what the flat line means—death. Middles have moments of false hope and moments of false despair. Highs and lows. The super highs and super lows allow full development of set pieces. Make sure you include them and set them up with foreshadowing.

MOVEMENT

If your story isn't in constant movement, it will sink from inertia. Constant movement is created in several ways: from action involving events, from raising questions and therefore reader curiosity, from imagery that evokes movement, and from emotional reversals. The payoff for movement is reader interest in what comes next.

Read the following passage from *Twilight*, a mystery by Nancy Pickard, paying attention to the movement created by the action and by the implied questions that force the reader to read on to get answers. I've added explanations for clarity in brackets. I've also underlined the action words and italicized the question raised by the action that creates movement.

> I flipped back the last flap [of a cardboard box in the mail], *hurrying* now because it hurt to squat [she had fallen in the street]. *What's in the box?*
>
> Started pulling out wads of crumpled newspaper. *What's under the paper?*
>
> And then screamed and jerked back up, adding a bit more noise to my scream because of what the sudden movement did to my body. *What in the world is in the box?!*
>
> "Holy shit!" I said, and again and again.
>
> "Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God," Cleo was screeching, as both of us jumped back from the package, she with more alacrity than I. "Is it alive? Is it alive?" *What dangerous animal is it?*

While this example—the animal is a tarantula—may seem simple, it displays a masterful understanding of suspense as Pickard creates movement through actions in coordination with unanswered questions.

The following example shows movement through imagery in narration. Notice how telling is transformed into a feeling of showing through movement. This passage was written by Jane Kirkpatrick in her novel, *All Together in One Place*. I've italicized the words that lend movement within the imagery and narration.

> "Someone carried it, delivered it here. The sickness." The Sister *paced*, a behavior that looked foreign to her usual rigid, wagon-tongue demeanor. Her words *took flight* too, so the *sizzle* of her S's *cracked* the air like heat lightning. Mary watched her *striding* back and forth between the wagon and the fire, thought to interrupt, but lacked sureness.

Notice movement on the level of the action words within this passage, but also notice the location of the dramatic tension—in the subtext: in the Sister's unusual demeanor, in the unpredictable image of heat lightning, and in Mary's uncertainty while watching the Sister pace. Whereas the raised questions in the prior passage about the tarantula came directly out of the surface action, here the questions come from the feeling of tension and distress by the Sister in the subtext. Questions create movement because the reader must read on to get answers.

NARRATION

You may have heard the axiom of effective fiction writing, "Show don't tell." This rule is only partially true. Every fiction writer needs to learn how to tell well. Any portion of your story—beginning, middle, or end—may suffer from narration that makes the reader grow restless and flip pages in search of something more engaging.

Narration means "what is told." As mentioned in chapter eight, it includes telling about characters, including their emotions; the locations, settings, and the environment; events, including the past, present, and future; and ideas of the author or the viewpoint character. A new character enters a scene and you want to describe him. You begin a chapter in a different location and you want the reader to be transported there. Your protagonist recalls the past or plans for the future. The events of the story trigger commentary on life or a point-of-view character shares her philosophy of life. How do you handle any of these forms of telling in an artful and engaging manner?

First and foremost, recognize when you are writing to supply author intentions instead of character needs. In other words, writers often have goals they want to accomplish in a particular scene, such as working in information or describing a setting or situation. This can lead to forgetting to outline what goals and needs the character would have. Instead of character-driven, the scene becomes author-driven, and the result is never as satisfying when the author intrudes.

Make a description spring from a character's point of view, and it

will automatically benefit from the unique "filter" of the characterization. Thus, all narration can become characterization.

One of the most difficult descriptions is that of the point-of-view character of herself. In the next passage, you'll see an example of character description exactly of the kind of telling you *don't* want to do.

> Mazy stood five-foot-nine inches and, since twelve years old, might best be described as ample. By the time she reached seventeen years old, ample had been replaced by "large." That's how she saw herself.

Notice the following narrated character description of Mazy, by Jane Kirkpatrick in *All Together in One Place.* The narration feels necessary not optional and springs from the character not the author.

> Finished, Mazy stood, brushed dirt from her ample knees. Ample. Ever since she was twelve years old and stood head to head with her father's five-foot-nine-inch frame, she'd thought of herself as ample. By the time she turned seventeen and married Jeremy Bacon, a man twice her age and exactly her height, the image of herself as large was as set as a wagon wheel in Wisconsin's spring mud.

Emotions are particularly tricky to narrate. Your first choice should be to "put them on the body." This means to show them as a physical reaction. In Jane Kirkpatrick's same novel, the young woman named Tipton sees her intended, Tyrell, whom she has not seen for six weeks, working on a horse, filing its hoof. Kirkpatrick writes: "A woman—a pretty woman—held the horse by its halter. Tipton felt her chest tighten." The reader's own body will register the emotions conveyed by "chest tighten."

One of the best ways to tell well is to couple the emotion with action, setting, imagery, movement, subtext, or all of the above.

Many times, you'll want to develop the emotion and open the reader to a fuller understanding of the character's emotions and relationships. You'll need to narrate the emotion.

One of the best ways to tell well is to couple the emotion with action, setting, imagery, movement, subtext, or all of the above. Here is Tipton, one page before she spots Tyrell among the pioneers in the wagon train. I've italicized the told emotion and described what makes it appear as if it is not strictly telling—when it really is.

> So much was *worrisome*. She tried not to think of it as she walked. (*action*) But there was the river, the Missouri. (*setting, image*) Wide and gorged with rain, it was worth *worrying* over. (*image, subtext danger*) People said lightning fires could race (*setting, action*) across the prairie and leave nothing but charred remains of wagons and people. (*strong image*) She could *worry* over that and over the Sioux, too, who could steal and kill (*action*) stragglers, and Pawnees who just harassed. (*strong image*) She'd heard tales of messages left by travelers scraped onto human skulls warning of the dangers of sickness ahead. (*strong image, action*) Everything was *worrisome* if she was honest, everything. Her mouth got dry with the thinking. (*showing emotion*)

In this last example from Jane Kirkpatrick's skillful writing, notice again how character-driven and character-filtered narration makes it not seem like telling at all. Also notice how implied movement from active verbs lend the feeling of showing to this telling, which includes narration about ideas, attitudes, and past events.

> What mattered to Tipton's way of thinking was time with Tyrell (*ideas narrated*), when her feet weren't so sore from the walking, when her hands weren't so red and dry from the water and wind. (*visceral and concrete images*)
>
> She had dreamed of making this journey together. Except for the first day out, there had been little to dream about (*ideas narrated*), just long hours of riding, then walking, and sometimes just waiting while Tyrell pounded on iron to repair the wheels. (*past events with movement from active verbs*) They moved fallen trees from trails, crossed rushing streams. Her days were filled with the

clang of Mr. Bacon's orders and Miz Bacon refusing while he brushed off dust and focused on "essentials." (*past events with movement from active verbs*) Tipton heard that word in her sleep.

PACE

In the unique world of fiction, time is anything but a mirror of reality, and yet the reader has the sense of realism about time and its passage in most short stories and books. The writer controls the rate of speed of the events. With a flick of the wrist, time can advance by hours or years, i.e., "The next morning . . ." or "Three years later . . ."

Controlling the rate of time passage, called "pace," is a complicated skill that improves with reading and writing with a focus on this one element. A few rules of thumb about pace may help you develop your skill:

- Scenes speed pace; sequels slow pace.
- Dialogue, a form of action, speeds pace; narration slows pace.
- Short sentences speed pace; longer sentences slow it.
- Movement from any source speeds pace; no movement stalls pace.
- Increased pace heightens the drama of crises and set pieces.
- Slower pace helps develop interior thoughts, feelings, and sensations.
- Faster pace can increase tension.
- Faster pace plus conflict or danger increases suspense.
- Slower pace enhances emphasis; quicker pace with narrative summaries of time or location reduce emphasis of irrelevancies.

DIALOGUE

Beginning fiction writers often make the mistake of assuming that dialogue is the equivalent of recorded speech. They have it half right; dialogue should give the impression of speech and conversation, but that effect comes from a developed skill in crafting it.

At its most basic, dialogue should reflect or deepen characterization and advance plot. These criteria alone will help you exclude what dialogue should not be used for: an information or research dumping ground, small talk and social conventions, or a soap box for an author's arguments or philosophy.

Here is an example of how strong dialogue can reflect and deepen characterization:

> "I ain't did it," he said.
>
> "You pleaded *no lo contendere*, partner."
>
> "The shithog got appointed my case done that. He said that it was worked out." He drew in on his hand-rolled cigarette, tapped the ashes off into the wind.
>
> When I didn't reply, he said, "They give me forty years. I was sixty-eight yestiday."
>
> "You should have pleaded out with the feds. You'd have gotten an easier bounce under a civil rights conviction," I said.
>
> "You go federal, you got to cell with colored men." His eyes lifted into mine. "They'll cut a man in his sleep. I seen it happen."

In this excerpt from *Cadillac Jukebox*, by James Lee Burke, each speaker is distinctive from the other, in attitude and use of language. The narrator, the second speaker, is clearly a confident and experienced attorney. He speaks in grammatically correct English but uses an easygoing slang that makes him seem street smart (partner, pleaded out with the feds, bounce). In direct contrast, the criminal, who speaks first, shows his lack of education through incorrect grammar, an accent, and the vernacular. This brief snippet of dialogue tells us a world of characterization about this old, white, Southern bigot.

Dialogue is also a tool for advancing the plot and providing characterization:

> "So you want me to ask this nice lady if I can have your envelope back?"
>
> The nice lady shook her head and clamped one hand over the envelope. . . .
>
> "One o'clock, Pal. I don't care how you do it, but I need that package in my hands by one o'clock." His indignant tone melted. "It's twelve-forty. It's twenty blocks. Think you can pull it off?"
>
> "Have I got time to clothes-pin some playing cards to the spokes of my bike? The clack-clack noise makes me go faster."
>
> "Fucking hopeless hippie hairball." The dial tone put an exclamation point on his final insult.

The heart of advancing plot is conflict. In this excerpt from *The Hard Karma Shuffle*, a hip mystery by Carolyn Rose and Mike Nettleton, the one character (Marvin) clearly wants the package that the other one (Paladin) has just delivered to a secretary, who tells him in subsequent interaction that once logged in, the package has become property of her company. Additionally, Paladin infuriates Marvin with his remark about taking time to clip playing cards to his messenger bike spokes.

Inexperienced fiction writers often write dialogue for one character that is indistinguishable from the other characters in the story. In both examples above, notice how distinctive the authors make each voice. When you develop your characters, perhaps creating histories and personalities, include speech. Build a lexicon that belongs to that character alone. Base it on education, ethnicity, social class, and regionalisms. In their use of dialogue (and in thought in narration), reflect their biases, attitudes, and vocations.

According to novelist Rita Mae Brown, in her terrific book, *Starting from Scratch*, she maintains that social class strongly colors use of language. Upper-class diction makes greater use of words derived

from Latinate origins, which also corresponds to higher education. You can spot many Latinate words because many of the nouns end in "-tion" or "-sion" and/or they have French derivation. Example: erudition, dispensation, pretension. The dialogue of a character from the upper class or higher education will come across as stiffer, more formal, and distant in emotions.

At the other extreme, lower class diction, traditionally reflective of less education, has its roots in Anglo-Saxon origins. According to Brown, these words are short, punchy, and direct in meaning and emotion. Example: "Kill the bastard! Help me! I've got time."

Middle class talk is the least distinctive of the three social classes. Characters will have flat, but pleasant speech. They'll avoid or smooth over emotions, and sound just like a documentary voice-over or an amateur psychologist. Example: "I need some space, sweetheart, some alone time. I'm not getting as much done as I should. No offense."

Ethnicity, race, ancestry, and era all add possibilities for creating unique character voice, including the addition of foreign words, slang, touches of dialect, and syntax (the order and arrangement of words in a sentence). Examples:

> "Aye, can you not smell the sweat on me? I came straight here without unsaddling."
>
> "Then shame! I taught you better than that. Go back, then, and take care of your mounts. By the time you've finished that, we'll be done here and you may join us."
>
> Old British. *The Sorcerer: Metamorphosis*, by Jack Whyte

> "If you'll shut up, we'll get started then," he said. "You understand that your blood ties you to the ani-kawi, the deer clan. You are the grandson of Ada-gal'kala, the greatest of Ani-yunwi-ya chiefs, who once crossed the great waters to sit in council with the British Father. Before him walked the ancient ones, whose tongue I still speak."
>
> 1776 Cherokee. *Oblivion's Altar*, by David Marion Wilkinson

"May I be permitted to introduce Chiyo to you, Teacher," Pumpkin said, "and ask your indulgence in instructing her, because she's a girl of very little talent."

1930s–1940s Japanese. *Memoirs of a Geisha*, by Arthur Golden

Another form of dialogue is talking to oneself. If a narrator talks out loud, it's dialogue, just as the examples above. If the narrator thinks, you have four choices: direct thought, indirect thought, indirect monologue, and summarized thought.

Direct thought is powerful, especially in stories that are told in third-person past tense. Direct thoughts ring in the readers' ears as if the dialogue was spoken out loud. It uses first person and present-tense verbs, no matter what tense the writer uses in the rest of the story. Direct thought is italicized. Use this form of dialogue sparingly, reserving this powerful voice for moments of great emotion or realization. Do not use it for mere musing. For instance, imagine a situation where a character stands at his sister's grave, knowing that she was murdered and her killer remains at large.

I promise you, Sis, with all of my love for you, I'll catch the bastard who killed you. Chad released a handful of cold dirt over the casket.

Indirect thought maintains the sense of summary more than dialogue. If the writer's story features third person and past tense, indirect thought continues this style. Using the same situation above, indirect thought would appear as follows:

He promised his sister, with all of the love he held for her, that he'd catch her murderer.

When indirect thought continues for many lines, it becomes an *interior monologue*. Extending our same example:

> He'd use his connections at gun shows to find him, and when he did . . . What would she expect him to do? Just turn the other cheek? If it was him lying inside the pine box, she would do exactly what he planned. Twins were like that. But, he reminded himself, now he was alone in the world.

Summarized thought steps back from the experience of "now time":

> He thought about what he'd do to find her killer and what Sis would do if it was him lying there dead.

Every bit of time and attention you devote to writing dialogue will pay off in reader interest throughout your book. Map 10-1 includes other guidelines for writing effective dialogue.

As you work on writing the middle of your stories, attending to the plot and characterization, keep returning to the heart of your writing. The heart is what motivates your hero or heroine, the universal need that keeps characters yearning and striving, and by story end to become forever free of a wounding past. As your protagonist despairs of ever achieving these goals, and the complications in the outer plot mount in difficulty, your story reaches the end of Act II, the middle. You approach the finale, from darkest hour through climactic ending, from the ultimate test to resurrection and rebirth into a person transformed.

Tips and Techniques of Effective Dialogue

Do limit dialogue to three interchanges, thoughts, or, as they say in screenplay terminology, "beats."

Don't repeat character names used in direct address, such as: "Bob, let's go." "Okay, Stan, where to?" "To your house, Bob."

Do make clear who is speaking, not only from the words they say, but also by using attributions: he said, she said.

Don't use attributions where the identity of the speaker is clear.

Do use action in place of attributions to show who is speaking and to reduce the use of "he said," or "she said."

Don't include introductions and small talk, such as: "Hi Mary," "How are you?" "May I introduce you to Jim?" "Jim, this is Mary."

Do keep dialogue short and non-repetitive.

Don't describe speech, such as: "she snorted," "he guffawed," or "she cooed."

Do lace dialogue with emotional tension and subtext, such as: "You didn't . . ." "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to . . . you know I never intended to hurt you."

Don't burden dialogue with a large chunk of information devoid of dramatic meaning.

Do weave in action, conflict, character reaction, and other elements between lines of dialogue.

Don't write long exchanges or pages of unbroken dialogue, i.e., "talking heads."

ELEVEN

Ending Steps

It is not the going out of port, but the coming in, that determines the success of the voyage.

Henry Ward Beecher

YEARS AGO, I WORKED with a former journalist who became an athlete and then a mentor about active meditation. In her nonfiction book, *The Spirited Walker*, Carolyn Scott Kortge explained that athletes recognize the two most difficult parts of any endeavor: the start and the finish. In her counsel to walkers, she tells them to overcome inertia, put on their shoes, and get out the door—no excuses. According to Carolyn, about three-quarters of the way through a walk of any distance, an internal voice begins to complain and lobby for quitting. *My calf muscle aches. I can quit here—I've gone far enough. This is taking too much time. I'm too busy.* Carolyn said that athletes recognize, even expect, the internal saboteur and continue to the end despite it.

One of your greatest challenges as a writer will be to push past the dragon guarding the gate near the end of writing your story or novel, and simply finish your first rough draft. Just finish. After you have read *A Writer's Journey*, Christopher Vogler's book on the Campbell-inspired Hero's Journey, you'll recognize this inertia as your own Belly of the Whale and Ordeal. Your antagonist? As the long-ago cartoon character Pogo once said, "I have seen the enemy and he is me."

Ending Well

The late Jack Bickham, prolific novelist and respected teacher, recommended that scenes end with a strong disaster, twist, or complication. He suggested a number of possible endings for your scene's point-of-view character:

- discovery that a newly begun task is more complicated than expected
- learning a disturbing piece of information
- arriving someplace new
- meeting someone who will significantly alter his or her life

Perhaps a dramatic event ends the scene—a crime, the arrival of someone unexpected, or a natural disaster.

However you end your scenes, work hard to craft powerful words or sentences for the "power positions." Power positions include the first words of any piece of writing (which is why the narrative hook has such power), including first words or sentences in a paragraph, section, or chapter, and last words or sentences in the same, including a scene.

Notice how the following three authors have capitalized upon the power positions in the following first sentences and also in the corresponding last sentences (or short paragraphs) in their first chapters or scenes:

First sentence: Harry Potter was a highly unusual boy in many ways.

Last sentence of scene and chapter one: Extremely unusual though he was, at that moment Harry Potter felt just like everyone else—glad, for the first time in his life, that it was his birthday.

Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban,
by J. K. Rowling

First sentence: It is the morning of the funeral and I am tearing my room apart, trying to find the right kind of shoes to wear.

Last sentence of scene and chapter one: I concentrate on the pain, and the blisters that are forming on my little toes, because that way I don't have to think about the coffin that is being lowered into the ground. Or that my father's body is inside it.

Tiger Eyes, by Judy Blume

First paragraph: They called it *taking four*. The tall, gaunt monk hovered at the lip of the five-hundred-foot cliff, nothing restraining him but the raw Himalayan wind. Shan Tao Yun squinted at the figure to see better. His heart clenched. It was Trinle who was going to jump—Trinle, his friend, who just that morning had whispered a blessing on Shan's feet so they would not trample insects.

Last paragraph of scene: The lieutenant kicked Shan, not hard, but with the motion of one accustomed to dealing with troublesome dogs. Beside Shan, Jilin flinched, reflexively shielding his head with his hands. Lieutenant Chang impatiently stepped forward and grabbed the exposed ankles. With a peevish glance at Feng, he jerked the body away from the remaining rocks. Instantly the color drained from Chang's face. He turned away and retched. The body had no head.

The Skull Mantra, by Eliot Pattison

If you continue in the same character's point of view, then the disaster or twist at the end of one scene will set up the next scene. However, you will have to decide whether to follow with another scene, a sequel, or a shortcut, and whether to shift points of view, locations, or times.

Structuring the Ending

Structurally, in most short stories, you should plan a moment or a scene of despair in which all hope appears lost. From this point, you can segue into the climax, the final Herculean fight by your protagonist to overcome opposition and reach the story goal. Having succeeded, your hero or heroine may have a full-blown epiphany, gain an illumined understanding of something fundamental, realize full transformation of self, or simply act or reflect in a way that supports the theme. Occasionally, a short story may end with a last twist that puts the entire character arc in a different light. There are many ways to end well.

The structure of novels is understandably more complex. Your middle will have featured many scenes, crises, and set pieces. With the passage of story time, the opposition to your hero's success should become more formidable. Time should be running out. Will he succeed—in time? Before the child dies, the food runs out, the bomb detonates, or the time gate closes forever?

The "darkest hour" in a novel is also referred to as Approach to the Inmost Cave or, in the Heroine's Journey terminology, the Urgent Yearning to Reconnect with the Feminine. In the outer plot, this step often corresponds with imprisonment, being trapped by the enemy, or being caught in an emotional catch-22, i.e., damned if you do; damned if you don't.

In a rush to reach the climax, many writers miss this quiet before the storm. Yet, it is a critically important turning point in the inner character story. Here, when the hero or heroine is forced to look inward and expect the worst, he or she can at last recognize what should have been obvious to the reader all along—that they have a blind spot about their own complicity in the difficulties. Their character flaw, their weakness, has constantly and ever more intensely blocked progress. *If I'd just accepted the help I was offered, not letting my pigheaded independence get in the way, I wouldn't be in this pickle.* Or, *if I had not been so blind in my loyalty, I would never have put trust in this man who betrayed me.*

The amount of self-awareness may not be greater than this, but even this much will be sufficient to negate the interference of the flaw or weakness, perhaps for the first time in the entire story. Freed from these shackles, you can use the strength, in conjunction with strategies, decisions, and outer events, to pull the protagonist out of the whale's belly and move forward to The Ordeal, the last battle of the climax.

The Climax

The climax of your story should be the biggest scene of your short story or novel. Treat it like a set piece. Make sure you lay your structural foundation with foreshadowed previews and a quickly paced contrasting scene. Then fully develop the climactic confrontation between protagonist and antagonist, hero and villain. "Fully develop" means to include all of the steps in a scene as covered in chapter eight. Offer the full palette of physical senses—sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell. Show character reactions to stimulus, including feelings and thoughts. Make the setting come alive and intensify the conflict with careful use of active verbs and vivid imagery.

You can have two different outcomes to your climax. Your protagonist can reach the story goal, or you make it clear that he or she will never reach it. Both endings are legitimate, and either one can be a happy ending or a tragic ending.

How so? It's obvious that if your protagonist reaches the goal and passes the ultimate test of character growth, you have a happy ending. But what if your protagonist reaches the plot goal but fails to come to terms with the weakness and past? Not a happy ending. A character who does not change or learn is a character doomed to relive the same psychodrama in a different plot.

A character who does not change or learn is a character doomed to relive the same psychodrama in a different plot.

On the other hand, you can show a hero or heroine who fails to reach the

plot goal, but who nevertheless passes the ultimate test. They face themselves squarely, overcome their weakness, and become the Master of Two Worlds, bringing back the gift of transformation to their clan and community. Is this a good or happy ending? Definitely. It is the inner character learning that defines the real success of a story.

Last of all, you can show your protagonist not only fail at reaching the outer goal but fail to reach any understanding or personal change. This character is a loser! Then your story is a tragedy.

Denouement

After your protagonist passes—or fails—the test that will allow resurrection and rebirth, the last part of your story will be wrapping up loose ends, also referred to by the French word *denouement.* In a mystery, this last part often includes an explanation of how the clues led the sleuth to figure out "whodunit." In other stories, the characters celebrate, enjoy special moments, and reflect on their lives. One rule about the denouement is to keep it short. It is, after all, post-climax, and you don't want to lose your reader because it goes on too long and becomes, well, anticlimactic.

Epilogues

Far fewer novels have epilogues than prologues, the epilogue being an optional post-ending page or two in a novel. Epilogues often feature a jump-cut in time and show the consequences and rewards for the protagonist and others. The couple who finds true love at story's end now have twins. The hero who saved the orphan now runs a plane service connecting would-be parents with an orphanage.

In books that are designed to be part of a series, an epilogue may offer the setup for the continuation of the drama into a next book. The mutant animal that was killed in the horror novel has a long-lost cousin who is even meaner and more violent.

If you feel you need an epilogue, keep it short. Everything after the climax is "anti" climactic. Only supply what you feel is essential for reader closure on the one story and, if relevant, interest in the next one.

Setting the Tone

Ending well is nearly as important as beginning well. You made a promise to your reader at the beginning of your story, and you must fulfill it by the end. You have promised to show events that lead conclusively to the story goal. The kidnapped child is found and the kidnapper killed. The separated lovers overcome their issues and apprehensions and get engaged or married.

Writers must meet the implied promise of the particular genre of their stories, and this means to show final events that were set up in the beginning.

One of the most popular endings is the epiphany. This means that the character "comes to realize" something fundamental about self or life. In an illuminating moment, the protagonist gains perspective on his or her life—the past, the struggle of the plot events that they have just finished, and of the potential of the future. This ending fits well with the character change in the Hero's Journey and fulfillment of the yearning.

Other possibilities for the tone of an ending are various forms of humor: the ironic twist, the good-natured joke, the reversal of the expected, and the incomplete or inconclusive ending that leaves the reader guessing.

What all endings must do is produce a satisfying feeling of completion and in some way echo the theme that arises out of the yearning that has driven the character throughout the story. A look at the literal end paragraphs or last sentences will demonstrate this closure.

Read this ending to *Seize the Night*, by Dean Koontz. Christopher Snow, the protagonist with a disease that prevents him from being in any light, has vanquished evil, but only with the help of his friends,

human and fur-faced. On the last page, Christopher has had his marriage proposal accepted by his girlfriend, and the novel ends as follows:

> The night sea rolled in from far Tortuga, from Tahiti, from Bora Bora, from the Marquesa, from a thousand sun-drenched places where I will never walk, where high tropical skies burn a blue that I will never see, but all the light I need is here, with those I love, who shine.

When I looked back at the start of this novel, which I thoroughly enjoyed because of the loyalty and love of the quirky friends, I rediscovered Koontz's first words—a quote by Thomas Jefferson: "Friendship is precious, not only in the shade, but in the sunshine of life. And thanks to a benevolent arrangement of things, the greater part of life is sunshine." Here, at the end of the novel, Koontz keeps his focus on that quote as the unifying theme, on light as symbolic, and on his unique protagonist who cannot be exposed to sunlight.

You may recall the protagonist named Quoyle in the beginning of Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News* mentioned in chapter one. The reader had learned about his "great damp loaf of a body," and how his father saw him as a failure. In the novel, when Quoyle's wife, Petal Bear, who "in another time, another sex, would have been a Genghis Khan," dies, Quoyle takes his daughters to his ancestral homeland in Newfoundland to confront his demons and reclaim his life. *The Shipping News*, which won the Pulitzer and National Book Award, ends with this poetic exultation:

> Quoyle experienced moments in all colors, uttered brilliancies, paid attention to the rich sound of waves counting stones, he laughed and wept, noticed sunsets, heard music in rain, said I do. A row of shining hubcaps on sticks appeared in the front yard of the Burkes' house. A wedding present from the bride's father.
>
> For if Jack Buggit could escape from the pickle jar, if a bird with a broken neck could fly away, what else might be possible? Water may be older than light, diamonds crack in hot goat's blood, mountain-

> tops give off cold fire, forests appear in mid-ocean, it may happen that a crab is caught with the shadow of a hand on its back, that the wind be imprisoned in a bag of knotted string. And it may be that love sometimes occurs without pain or misery.

Notice the last word of this masterpiece—*misery*. This word describes the state of being of the protagonist in the novel's beginning. Now at the end, he has found freedom from his inner prison. The character has indeed changed, truly had an epiphany, and the end is directly related to the story beginning.

You can rarely go wrong ending your story in the same setting, with the same characters, as you began it with. In *Twilight*, a mystery by Nancy Pickard, published in 1995, she does just this. Her protagonist, Jenny, her husband, Geof, and their friend Nancy meet at her house and unravel the final connections to the deaths from alleged vehicle accidents, including the first one that began the book and brought Jenny and Geof to Nancy and her husband, Bill's, house to begin with. Now, with the guilty party identified, the novel ends as follows:

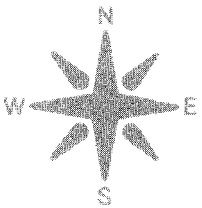
> "Forgive Bill," Nellie sobbed. "God forgive me."
>
> There wasn't much doubt about God, I thought, as I put my hand over hers again, but what about the law?

This ending makes the perfect set-up for Pickard's epilogue where the protagonist and her husband discuss how the law would handle the unique circumstances of the deaths. They discuss the future and answer more of the loose ends of the story, including a character believed by some in the story to be a ghost. This first of a two-section epilogue ends with another echo of the book's theme: "He [*the 'ghost'*] just wanted to halt David long enough to attack him, I guess. We really had him running." "Guilt's a hard driver."

The final section of the epilogue ends with a kind of mystical closure, with Jenny deciphering a rune and an imagined visualization of the "ghost," a man named Johnny Vaught, now actually dead, in one of her photographs.

Even though Dean Koontz was writing sci-fi/suspense, Annie Proulx was writing literary fiction, and Nancy Pickard was writing a category mystery, notice how all three supplied an ending with an echo of the yearning that became fulfilled and translated into a thematic statement. They each end in the point of view of the protagonist and with a sense of peace and hope.

As you reach the ending of your stories, look back at your beginning and find ways to make them relate to each other. Read stories and novels like yours and study how others connect the beginning and the end. Notice if and how they echo the deepest meaning of their stories in these final moments. Know, too, that your story will be at the same time like other stories and yet entirely original. Therefore, you know best, using your heart and your gut, when you have crafted a satisfying conclusion to your creation.



SOUTH

Troubleshooting and Problem-Solving

TWELVE

Problems of Characterization, Structure, Technique, and Style

I had to grow up and learn to listen for the unspoken as well as the spoken—and to know a truth. I also had to recognize a lie.
Eudora Welty in One Writer's Beginnings

THE DOCTOR WILL SEE you now. The book doctor, that is. Those of us who work as fiction editors frequently feel as if we are physicians ministering to ailing stories and sometimes to their ailing authors as well.

Writing fiction is art as much as craft. Every piece is an original creation. Yet, art can be enhanced and originality encouraged when a writer fixes mistakes and weaknesses in craft. Most of the problems addressed in this section will be craft-based. For the majority of fiction writers, clearing up mistakes and weaknesses in craft, and time and practice will take care of art and originality.

Use the following sections as a self-editing checklist to diagnose your problems with character, as follows:

- Characterization, including point of view and dialogue
- Story and plot, including conflict, action, and pace
- Narration, including descriptions of place, era, and mood

Characterization

Diagnosis #1: Underdeveloped characterization that produces inadequate depth, dimensionality, believability, or interest; in other words, flat, boring characters.

Treatment #1: In fifteen years of editing novels, I've noticed a peculiar but common problem: The last character to emerge as interesting or dimensional is usually the protagonist. Yet, this character is supposed to be the star! Why is this so? Writers may identify with the hero or heroine more than any other character. As a result, they may have a blind spot about the development of the protagonist.

Check and revise for these key areas of character development: a clear story yearning; a traumatic past and a near past; a prominent and heroic strength and a primary weakness; a host of unique personality traits, habits, likes, dislikes, talents, hobbies, attitudes, and quirks; strong emotions and motives; fears and secrets, and one or several contradictions that can be explained.

Diagnosis #2: Passive characters that watch rather than act, or are on the defensive, or whose actions are not bound by the conflicts, i.e., the character could walk away from the situation.

Treatment #2: An interested narrator as a story viewpoint, someone who watches and comments on the protagonist, is a difficult viewpoint. It's best if this narrator's fate is inextricably bound to the protagonist, avoiding the unemotional "watcher" and a lack of drama. When writers have a passive protagonist, the story is in trouble. A protagonist should be striving to reach the outer story goal, resolving the plot problem and relieving inner suffering.

This striving makes for a heroic character, who formulates goals, leaves his comfort zone, and fights his way through obstacles. He is a Warrior archetype. While other archetypes are legitimate, you must do in-depth development of any protagonist you would seek to characterize as weak or passive.

Often a protagonist on the defensive means that your story goal has been formulated in terms of the antagonist's goals, e.g., to prevent detonation of the nuclear bomb. If so, determine what "positive" goal your protagonist would achieve by preventing that detonation. Often, if you show your character acting toward this end goal, you can recast the story in a way to show a protagonist in an offensive position.

If your point-of-view character could walk away from a conflict, either you have not provided enough at stake in the conflict related to the character and should build more relationship, or you have cast the wrong character in your scene. If your story problem does not directly affect your protagonist, you may have chosen the wrong hero or heroine as your star.

Diagnosis #3: Insufficient relationship, chemistry, contrast, or conflict between characters.

Treatment #3: Increase the relatedness of your characters, and you raise the level of emotions and potential of conflict. Think *Peyton Place*, where everybody is involved in everybody else's business. You are building a microcosm, a tiny universe. Blood ties increase caring and feelings over potential loss. Love and sexual liaisons also increase ties. What about financial ties? And so forth. Make your characters essential in each other's worlds.

Insufficient character chemistry can stem from underdevelopment of characterization or a failure to think in terms of opposites and contrast. Read a psychology text or Linda Goodman's *Sun Signs* and develop distinctive differences between your characters. When you give them different goals, goals at cross-purposes to one another, whether ally or enemy, you heighten conflict, and conflict means heightened reader suspense. Examine every scene and add conflict, in subtext—tension beneath the surface—if not in the events. Even best friends sharing clues or talking over what to do can have different agendas.

Diagnosis #4: Too many or too few characters.

Treatment #4: If you increase the relationships between your characters—familial, professional, romantic—you may discover that you can double up jobs for one character, thereby getting rid of superfluous characters. Why did you give your character three children? Why not one? If your protagonist has two best friends who are sidekicks or helpers, can you merge the two into one? Can you justify every point-of-view character? If you have more than three, can you eliminate or combine the others?

Too few characters often corresponds to the single viewpoint story. Maybe your first-person story would gain dimension with the addition of a third-person subjective viewpoint of the antagonist or of another main character. Perhaps your singular third-person story really needs to become multiple viewpoints.

Too few characters may also signal the need to develop one or several subplots, which will add depth and interest to your story.

Point of View

Diagnosis #1: Inconsistent point of view (POV); jumps from omniscient to third person or has author intrusion (omniscient), such as revealing facts the POV character doesn't know or wouldn't be thinking about.

Treatment #1: Read your draft carefully and note which sentences, paragraphs, or even pages could be attributed to a video camera. Mark those where the text reveals subjective feelings, physical sensations, or emotions of a character other than the viewpoint character. Look for POV slips where you, the writer, intrude with explanation or description that would not be on the mind of the POV character at that time. Delete these slips or rewrite them through the perceptions and experiences of your POV character.

Diagnosis #2: Problems with "psychic distance," either inappropriate to events and characters or jumps that jar.

Treatment #2: Psychic distance refers to the visual and emotive distance between characters or between a character and the environment. For instance, if you begin a book with a sex scene, your psychic distance may be too close, too intimate, for the reader's involvement with the characters. They've just met! A common mistake is beginning a character description with the face and hair, then jumping to the shoes or pants, and returning to the eye color. Worse is giving a specific detail about a character, such as trickles of sweat from a hot day and then shifting to the parched trees and back again to the character's dry mouth. The effect is like a herky-jerky video camera.

Diagnosis #3: A wrong character is given the POV.

Treatment #3: This is a tough problem to spot. If your protagonist and one or several other POV characters are in a scene, your protagonist should be the viewpoint character in nine out of ten times. If a POV character has a weak scene goal compared to another viewpoint character, try switching viewpoints for greater drama. Most set pieces and the sequels that follow them should be in your protagonist's viewpoint, unless your novel is sufficiently complex and long to have well-developed subplots and parallel or main characters with their own set pieces.

Diagnosis #4: The point of view hovers or borders on omniscient.

Treatment #4: An unanchored viewpoint shows a character in action and supplies only what the character sees. The remedy for a hovering viewpoint is almost always deeper characterization, including addition of other visceral sensations (sounds, smells, touch, taste), emotions (as displayed by a physical response, e.g., clenched his fist), thoughts (including strategies for a scene goal), references to a past (including the yearning and/or memories of the past). When a character is fully developed, the viewpoint no longer appears to hover.

Diagnosis #5: Awkward shifts from one POV to another POV.

Treatment #5: Because POV should be maintained throughout one scene, section, or chapter—unless the writer is using omniscient viewpoint—most awkward shifts occur between these units of structure. Smoother transitions can come from repetition of a key word or phrase, such as "Later on Tuesday," or by starting with the new character's name.

Dialogue

Diagnosis #1: Too much dialogue for too long; i.e., "talking heads."

Treatment #1: Too much dialogue may mean a "speech" rather than a dialogue, and all you need to do is break it up with a response from another character so that it becomes a conversation. You may be loading up the dialogue with too much information or offering the equivalent of a court-reporter transcript. In either case, prune, snip, and tighten. The more you cut, the greater the impact of what is left.

"Talking heads" refers to dialogue that goes on too long without any other element of craft, such as small-scene action or character sensation, emotion, or thought. Few fiction writers can keep readers involved solely on the basis of dialogue, and those few are masters of characterization through the use of voice.

Repair talking heads by adding setting, sensory experience, and other characterization, all through the filter of your point-of-view character.

Diagnosis #2: Voice of one speaker is indistinguishable from another, and they are all pancake flat.

Treatment #2: Develop figures of speech, regionalisms, slang, high or low diction, and words reflective of your characters' ethnicity, race, country or ancestry of origin, vocation, and personality. Build a word list of favorite phrases, including metaphors that fit that character's outlook on life. For instance, someone who lives and works close to

nature will *flow* with references to the seasons, fruits of his labor, seeds of faith, and so forth. This dialogue will be far different from someone in law enforcement or soldiering, whose speech will be *shot through* with references to assaults, blockades, and battles.

Diagnosis #3: Dialogue lacks tension, fails to move the plot.

Treatment #3: Revise based on your POV character's scene goal or emotional need. Use dialogue to show the POV character pushing to reach the goal and running into opposition. If your scene does not have this opposition inherent in it, delete the scene. Or, you may need to add an antagonistic character to a scene and let that character challenge your POV character through dialogue.

Diagnosis #4: Attributions—who is speaking—take the reader out of the story.

Treatment #4: Replace almost all attributions that describe the dialogue. These include words such as snarled, growled, giggled, chortled, announced, chided, remarked, scolded, etc. Replace them with "he said" or "she said." Replace most of your uses of "he said" or "she said" with a sentence of action that makes clear who is speaking.

Diagnosis #5: Avoid over-the-top writing of dialect, slang, jargon, profanity, clichés, foreign terms, or speech tags.

Treatment #5: Dialect is especially hard to read, and if your readers must slow down to translate it, you've taken them out of the magic mood of being lost in the story. You can affect dialect with a few dropped "g's" such as "walkin' and thinkin'," but avoid trying to phonetically spell dialects. For all other special language (slang, jargon, foreign terms), use a light hand. Think of these words as if they are hot chili pepper added to a dish; a miniscule amount makes a big impression. Clichés and speech tags can get old fast. If they are part of your characterization, develop a list so that you can vary them throughout the story.

Story and Plot

Diagnosis #1: Absent, weak, or unclear story yearning.

Treatment #1: Plot alone sustains few stories. Give your protagonist and other POV characters a universal human need such as self-respect, identity, family unity, survival, or belonging, and connect it to a past event where that need was denied or made impossible. Develop only one such need. Show the character as he or she yearns for and pursues fulfillment of this one need throughout all parts of the story.

Diagnosis #2: Episodic story structure lacks central conflict or a story goal.

Treatment #2: Review five-part story structure and the Hero's Journey and outline your plot accordingly. Choose and demonstrate one big and important problem as your inciting incident. That problem will, in turn, define your story's end and the goal to which your protagonist strives. Make sure your plot goal can be expressed in specific and tangible ways: Not "happiness," but "custody of the kids." Not "security," but "a home and a job." Not "success," but "finding the cure."

Diagnosis #3: Plot is too familiar or clichéd.

Treatment #3: Our lives are flooded with visual medium—television, cable, movies, and the Internet. While every plot you can conceive has already been done, you must create an original rendition. Don't settle for your first plot idea; they are probably full of what you have most recently seen or read. Push your imagination to brainstorm "what-if" scenarios. Write your ideas as a synopsis and ask for feedback from your writing group or friends. Specifically ask them if any part of your story seems familiar or clichéd.

Read plot synopses for your genre to familiarize yourself with what's been done. You can find these in *Publishers Weekly*, in the arts or books section of your local newspapers, or in directories such as the

ones produced by the Gale Group, *What Do I Read Next? A Reader's Guide to Current Genre Fiction*, or *What Romance Do I Read Next? A Reader's Guide to Recent Romance Fiction*, or *Now Read This: A Guide to Mainstream Fiction*, by Nancy Pearl, published by Libraries Unlimited. Read widely and pay attention to common themes and plots.

Diagnosis #4: The plot lacks dramatic tension or the threat doesn't seem real.

Treatment #4: The protagonist and antagonist should be forces of equal power working at cross-purposes to one another with an equal passion. The cliché for this describes that an "irresistible force meets an immoveable object." Check that you have given your hero and villain specific skills, tools, knowledge, and helpers that are diverse, equal, and threatening. Make sure that you've given your antagonist a face; in other words, avoid the antagonist that is a collective, such as a government or bureaucracy. Make sure you have individualized that larger entity with a threatening individual that can and will do harm to your protagonist.

A plot can lack dramatic tension if the scenes have more or less equal suspense, or if you have failed to create a crescendo of tension leading to crises and set pieces. You can rarely go wrong intensifying conflict. Turn differences of opinion into arguments or fights. Turn potential loss into outright tragedy. Examine every scene and define your source of conflict and the threat. Assign a level of suspense from one, the lowest, to five. Ask yourself what different goal, conflict, or threat would fit your plot but is far worse than what you have written—and then write it. Make your lows super low—a death is about as low as low can be—and make sure your highs are triumphant or joyful. Exaggerate the emotional reactions of your POV characters and in the end, they will be just about right.

Diagnosis #5: Too many subplots or too few.

Treatment #5: When a story has too many subplots, the strength of the primary plot is weakened or obscured. Your book may reflect

this problem by its length or by its large cast of characters, especially point-of-view characters. Have you mapped your plots on a marker board or story board? Plot the Hero's Journey for your protagonist and major viewpoint characters and look at your blueprints. Can you get rid of viewpoint characters and minor subplots? Can you describe the spine of your story, the primary plot, and the inner need that defines the take-away message of your whole story?

Remember, subplots must intersect with and be related to the primary plot. The viewpoint characters in the subplot must also mirror or be opposite to your protagonist's yearning. For instance, if your protagonist yearns for personal power, then other characters must in some way seek to have, misuse, or express power. This produces what has been termed a "master effect" that unifies characters, subplots, and the primary plot.

Too few subplots may make your primary plot seem too direct or simple. You need to divert the reader's attention from the "falling piano." Add subplots. The romantic subplot is the most common, but you may create one involving home or work life. Use the subplot to create moments of higher conflict or tension when the primary plot has lower tension or sequels, and vice versa. Bring the subplots to their climax just before the climax of the primary plot. That way, the subplots will contribute their dramatic energy to your climax.

Conflict

Diagnosis #1: Conflict seems contrived and is hard to believe.

Treatment #1: Go back to the drawing board and check that you have provided all of the setup to make your conflict believable. Avoid illogical or atypical actions. For instance, you may need to do more research to learn how law enforcement investigates crimes. Make sure you don't give your antagonist superhuman powers—unless he is su-

perhuman or alien. Everyday people don't own Lear jets to fly across country and spit in someone's face. They also can't come up with a million-dollar ransom with ease. Plug your holes of logic and avoid the contrivance.

A good rule is to begin with conflict, create more and worsening conflict, and end with a new conflict.

Diagnosis #2: Conflict is too mild or situation doesn't create enough conflict within the character.

Treament #2: Conflict is the source of reader interest. Mild conflict stirs mild suspense. You may be a nice, conflict-avoiding person, but as a writer, get mean! Replace your character's cut arm with a broken arm. Replace the fire damage with the loss of the entire house—or neighborhood.

If a situation doesn't arouse enough conflict *within* your character, you may need to change the situation or alter the relationship of the character to the situation. For instance, if an ex-boyfriend gets married, it's not as big a deal as if he is the father of your character's unborn child. If a $20,000 car gets totaled in an accident, the conflict for your character will be greater if it's his first car *and* he just dropped his insurance when he lost his job.

Sometimes, the answer to insufficient conflict is to delete a scene entirely. Summarize the interaction in narration and jump-cut to the next scene where the stakes are higher and the characters are desperate to succeed.

Diagnosis #3: Conflict occurs too late in the scene or chapter.

Treatment #3: At the very beginning of scenes, the POV character's goal should be clearly stated or else implied by former events. Don't ask the reader to invest on faith, hoping they eventually figure out what is important and then understand the conflict. A good rule is to begin with conflict, create more and worsening conflict, and end with a new conflict.

Diagnosis #4: Characters are too agreeable.

Treatment #4: Character chemistry arises not only out of contrasts but also out of conflict between characters, even between characters who share the same goals. A husband is a police officer who must catch the criminal. The wife needs him to be a husband and father, and they argue about him leaving. A second form of "too agreeable" is when a protagonist or POV character has too much inner peace, or they are too competent in the world. Disturb that inner peace by making the absence of need fulfillment [like a hungry dog gnawing on the person's innards]. Throw them off balance in the world; reduce their competencies by pushing them out of their comfort zones and into piranha-infested waters. Ask yourself where a particular character would be most uncomfortable in terms of setting, for instance. Then stage a scene in that setting. Your character hates riding horses? Force him on horseback. You get the idea.

Diagnosis #5: Not enough scenes or set pieces.

Treatment #5: Too few scenes or set pieces means too little conflict. Conflict is at the heart of these structures. Go back to your maps of the plot and increase plot complexity by adding scenes, crises, and set pieces. If you run out of ideas, gather a group of your writing friends together for a brainstorming session. Ask "what-if?" and write down all responses, even far-out and silly ones.

Pace

Diagnosis #1: Pace is too slow.

Treatment #1: When the pace is too slow, you need more action. More action means more scenes and greater conflict. Usually, a too slow pace also means too much narration (telling), including too much of a character's interior thoughts, feelings, and sensations. You may need to trim these elements.

Slow pace may also signal overuse of passive, boring, and to-be verbs. Passive verbs include ones like "appeared, seemed, or became." The most overused boring verbs are "looked, walked, and turned." To-be verbs are any variation of "is, was, were, be, being, and been."

Slow pace may also stem from failure to create movement within narration through the use of active imagery and through raising questions. Read each sentence and ask yourself if some question is raised that will pull the reader into the next sentence in search of an answer—which you may or may not offer. For instance: "He grabbed the binoculars and saw the *Susie-Q* hoist its sail, heading back to port." This sentence has minimal speed produced by the two action verbs, grabbed and hoist, and the suspense meter is at best registering a one.

Read this revision: "He grabbed the binoculars. He peered over the cresting waves. There, he saw her, and strained to make out the boat's name. The *Susie-Q*—but why was she hoisting her sail?" Each sentence leaves the reader asking a question that leads to the next sentence and the next, in search of answers. The pace is far quicker in this revision and the writing holds much higher dramatic intensity.

Another way to instantly speed pace is to use shorter sentences. When your characters approach danger or are fleeing from it, use short sentences to speed the pace and correspond to the quickened heartbeat.

Diagnosis #2: Pace is too fast.

Treatment #2: When pace is too fast, that usually means too much action without other elements intruding. For practice, take the last sentences about the man who raised the binoculars. Each of these sentences has a short action and the pace clips right along. To slow the pace, create sentences in between these. Just add character thoughts, reactions, physical sensations, interaction with another character, or details of setting or the environment.

When writers use a narrative summary, they are moving a story along: "They spent the rest of the afternoon fishing, returning home

at dark." If you want to slow a story down, develop scenes for what happened during the afternoon of fishing.

Diagnosis #3: Flashbacks come too soon or are unnecessary.

Treatment #3: Flashbacks bring forward movement to a dead halt and steer the reader's attention to the backstory. If you include them too early, in the first page or even the first chapter, your readers not only don't care, they feel antagonistic toward your interruption of the present story, which they are still working to figure out. An exception is a story that begins in the flashback past and then continues in the present or jump-cuts to the present.

Writers may want to try other devices for bringing out the past, working the information in as seamlessly as possible into the now-time story. Here is a list of possible substitutes for a flashback: conversation with another character; anything written, such as a newspaper article, a report or memo, or a letter. If you do use something written, such as a police report, only provide the essential words. Don't be like a photocopy machine providing everything written in the report. The same goes for diary or journal entries. Just print a line or two at a time, as the information is relevant to the ongoing story—unless your story structure is epistolary.

A good place to use a flashback, either in summary or in a re-created active scene, is after a crisis or set piece. At these times, your readers are ready for a rest from the highwire tension, and they should be eager to become more invested in your characters. Showing them the past is a great way to increase their involvement and desire to see the character succeed in resolving the past wound as well as in reaching the outer goal.

Occasionally, I've worked on a novel that reminds me of one of those cereal boxes that has a picture of the picture on the cereal box, giving you that sense of infinity. The writers of these stories put a flashback inside a flashback inside a flashback. The story becomes convoluted, difficult for the reader to follow. It's like tracking an animal over rocks.

Use of flashback will slow your story, and you'll have to regain momentum in the forward story. As a pacing device, it is useful, but make sure you can afford, or need, the slowdown.

Diagnosis #4: Scene plays too slowly; dramatic tension is low.

Treatment #4: Two pacing techniques will help increase dramatic tension. First, use foreshadowing—of conflict, of set pieces, and of events of pleasure or peril. If you show the POV character in a scene hiding a knife in his boot before the guards drag him into the shed, the reader will experience a sense of heightened and faster pace, perhaps reading faster, to see what happens *when* he pulls out the knife.

Second, too much development of a scene slows pace. Writers need to assess how much buildup of suspense they've created prior to a scene. They must also determine what's at stake and how formidable the opposition will be. By these gauges, you can know whether you need to minimize development of characterization and narration and "cut to the chase," or whether you have the leisure to tease the reader and elongate satisfaction of their curiosity. What comes just before a scene and just after it may be as important as the actual scene events.

Exchanges of dialogue have a pace that makes sense to the listener. Too much interruption for attributions or to show actions can make dialogue sound too unnatural. Check your lines of dialogue and make sure that some exchanges have no attributions—if you want to pick up the pace. Do include other small scene action or interior character development if you desire to slow the pace.

Diagnosis #5: Pace is too even, not enough variety.

Treatment #5: If all of your scenes, sequels, shortcuts, and chapters are about the same length, you risk creating a rhythm that is too regular. Likewise, if your scene drama reaches a similar peak of intensity in most scenes, your pace will seem too even, i.e., boring, as well. The answer lies in variety. Vary the lengths of your structural units and create dramatic highs and lows. Vary chapter lengths as allowed by your genre.

Narration

Diagnosis #1: Narration is offered in "indigestible" blocks of text.

Treatment #1: Most of the time, narration should be woven into the ongoing action of the plot and that necessitates threading it in—a sentence or two here, a phrase or two there. In this way, what is being told, whether about character history or setting or other description, will be carried by the forward movement. If your narration is further filtered through and colored by the unique attitudes and perceptions of the POV character, the narration will also seem like characterization.

Narration provides context for action. As a story unfolds and readers become more deeply involved, they welcome context—background about the characters, exploration of motives and clues, and explanations of unfamiliar processes or work.

Diagnosis #2: Narration fulfills author's goal instead of character's need.

Treatment #2: A well-established story can support several paragraphs of context. Even if the story will support a "chunk" of narration, you must still tell well. Make sure that narration is character-driven—that the character would be thinking and needing the information when you offer it. Narration stands out, in ways you don't want it to, when the author writes to meet his or her goal to provide information, research, or explanation. Everything, even what is told, should *appear* as if it originates with your viewpoint character, and it must supply his or her immediate needs. Author purposes must be subservient to character needs.

Diagnosis #3: Narration is too generic; settings could be almost anywhere.

Treatment #3: Use concrete nouns, proper nouns of places, and detailed specific imagery to create a place like no other. Select specific

objects within a setting to create a focus in the foreground and build a sense of perspective to the scene. Describe the setting, whether outside in a city or countryside or inside an office or home, through your viewpoint character's sense of sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell and also through your character's associations, memories, and immediate needs. Select which items in a setting to describe in detail according to where you want to direct the reader's attention. Also select for emphasis of symbolic meanings, such as the window in Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain.*

Diagnosis #4: Narration seems too inert or intellectual, apart from the story.

Treatment #4: Use active verbs that convey the idea of movement within the narration. Monica Wood calls this method "show-tell" in her wonderful book *Description.* Pair phrases of physical movement with emotions or pair emotional movement with physical descriptions. For example, consider the movement within these sentences near the beginning of *A Map of the World,* by Jane Hamilton. I've italicized the words that provide movement:

> It was already seven o'clock in the morning, long past time to *close* the windows and doors, *trap* what was left of the night air, slightly cooler only by virtue of the dark. The dust on the gravel had just enough energy to *drift* a short distance and then *collapse* on the flower beds. The sun had a white cast, as if shade and shadow, any *flicker* of nuance, had been *burned out* by its own fierce center. There would be no late afternoon gold, no pale early morning yellow, no flaming orange at sunset. If the plants had vocal cords, they would *sing* their holy dirges like slaves.

This is narration, yet the sense of movement is so great, I doubt many readers feel as if they are being told information.

Diagnosis #5: Setting or era not researched enough (or over-researched) or too arbitrary to the plot.

Treatment #5: Sometimes writers have good setting detail, with concrete and proper nouns, but the setting details—or those of the time or era of the story, are too thin. Perhaps the writer did little research or stopped describing the setting too soon, believing she had enough. The answer is to get on the Net or pursue other research until you have far more information than you are ever likely to use.

Occasionally, the opposite is true—the writer has gone research mad and has to put it someplace; why not the story? In this case, the research, as heavy-handed narration, intrudes upon the story. Once again, the writer's enthusiasm to share overwhelms the character-driven story.

Is the setting or time period of your story well chosen, not arbitrary? You must be able to supply a logical answer why you chose

REVISION AND SELF-EDITING

***The 38 Most Common Fiction Writing Mistakes*, by Jack Bickham**

***Setting*, by Jack Bickham**

***Dare to Be a Great Writer: 329 Keys to Powerful Fiction*, by Leonard Bishop**

***Self-Editing for Fiction Writers*, by Renni Browne and Dave King**

***1818 Ways to Write Better & Get Published*, by Scott Edelstein**

***A Story is a Promise*, by Bill Johnson**

***Revision: A Creative Approach to Writing and Rewriting Fiction*, by David Michael Kaplan**

***Make Your Words Work*, by Gary Provost**

***The Weekend Novelist*, by Robert J. Ray**

***Revision*, by Kit Reed**

***The Truth About Fiction*, by Steven Schoen**

your locations, not only the primary one, but any shift in location. Many stories benefit from taking place in a single geographic location, although you should do what is typical for your genre.

If you do change settings, the reason must spring from the necessity of the plot and character. Likewise, some time periods are more dynamic than others. Most historical stories are more effective if placed at a time of historic change—wars, revolutions, or cataclysmic events—human or natural. The writer can then take advantage of the conflicts and air of uncertainty inherent in the period and/or locale.

IN addition to giving your manuscript the preceding health checkup, you can add to a self-editing checklist by reading books on revision or that include problems and solutions. The resource box on page 202 offers some titles.

Ready to Market?

Take the test offered in Map 12-1 to determine whether you have made your manuscript fail-safe and market worthy. When you have revised, received feedback from your writing friends, and revised again—and again, you'll eventually reach a point where you are uncertain if you are ready to market, the subject of the next chapter. You may want to consider yet one more step prior to seeking publication. That step is to hire a professional book editor.

Like anyone offering a service, especially one that involves an artistic creation, experience and skill vary widely. Freelance editors, also known as book doctors and independent book editors, are not required to pursue any course of study or to acquire a license. Few colleges offer courses on editing. If they do, most of the time the emphasis is on editing nonfiction.

A qualified editor of novels can give you a quantum leap in your education and save you years of repeating bad habits or missing fundamental areas of craft. An unqualified editor can set you back years or

treat you in a way that would discourage you from continuing to write.

As in so many consumer areas: Buyer Beware. Apply common sense and good judgment. Ask questions, meet with the editor if possible, and find out the depth and breadth of her experience. Ideally, find someone with whom you share some kind of positive rapport. Listen to your hunches. From an editor's viewpoint, I experience editing of fiction as an intuitive as well as rational skill. I do my best work when I can flow into the mind of the writer—or believe I can—through the words on the page. I intuit what the writer might have hoped to convey but didn't or what the writer did convey and would have been better not to. Like music, fiction writing is full of nuances of rhythm, meaning, sound, and even color. Yet, if your editor is not grounded in the rules of structure and craft, you'll miss getting much-needed coaching on the basics.

Price also varies widely among book editors. Some charge by the page and others by the hour. Some ask to see the whole manuscript and then give a bid on the whole job. Others prefer to work on a sample, such as your first one-hundred pages, before committing to a whole novel. Prices also vary according to what level of editing you request. Copyediting, also called line editing, means correction of grammar, punctuation, and typographical errors. Substantive or content editing means that the editor will address all of the elements of fiction craft. Some editors do one or the other, and some editors do everything. Shop around, but also count the money you spend as part of your professional education. As in every profession, you can ask around and solicit comments and recommendations.

When you do feel ready to market your novel, you have a new set of skills to learn. Now that you feel confident about writing fiction, to successfully market you must learn how to write *nonfiction*, to be able to write query and cover letters. The next chapter shows you exactly how.

MAP 12-1

Can Your Novel Pass This Test?

TEST: *Answer yes or no to the following questions:*

1. Does your story promise to fulfill a single, fundamental yearning of your protagonist, one that reflects an issue of human need, such as forgiveness, belonging, redemption, family unity, or self-respect?
   Resource: *A Story Is a Promise*, by Bill Johnson (www.storyispromise.com)

2. Is your novel plotted dramatically, not episodically, according to Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey or Maureen Murdock's Heroine's Journey?
   Resources: *The Writer's Journey*, by Christopher Vogler; *The Heroine's Journey*, by Maureen Murdock; *The Key*, by James N. Frey

3. Does your protagonist pursue a clear-cut story goal, one that only he or she can reach? Is the goal one that readers will care about?
   Resource: *How to Tell a Story*, by Gary Provost and Peter Rubin

4. Do you use your protagonist's strength to advance the plot; do you use the weakness ("fatal flaw") to introduce complications and setbacks?
   Resource: *Writing and Selling Your Novel*, by Jack H. Bickham; *Creating Characters: How to Build Story People*, by Dwight Swain

5. Have you selected viewpoints consciously, been consistent in their development, changed viewpoint only when you change scenes or chapters?
   Resource: *Characters and Viewpoint*, by Orson Scott Card

MAP 12-1

Continued

6. Have you deepened your characters by filling out worksheets of character traits and determined which archetypes and metaphors underlie their deepest motivations?
   Resources: *The Hero Within*, by Carol S. Pearson; *The Survivor Personality*, by Al Siebert, Ph.D.; *45 Master Characters*, by Victoria Schmidt; *The Heroine's Journey*, by Maureen Murdock; *Dynamic Characters*, by Nancy Kress

7. Does your protagonist face ever-greater obstacles to reaching the external story goal and at the "darkest hour" all but lose hope?
   Resource: *Story*, by Robert McKee

8. Do you reveal an unresolved problem from your protagonist's past that is activated by the plot and fits with your theme?
   Resources: *Dynamic Characters*, by Nancy Kress; *Characters and Viewpoint*, by Orson Scott Card

9. Is every page enriched by sounds, touch sensations, smells, and tastes, as well as by sights, all conveyed through the viewpoint character's perceptions?
   Resource: *Description*, by Monica Wood

10. Do you advance your plot using scenes, sequels, and movement that spring from dramatic tension? Do you begin your scenes with clear goals (stated or implied)? Are your sequels rich in emotion? Do you constantly raise questions in the minds of your readers?
    Resources: *Scene and Structure*, by Jack Bickham; *A Story is a Promise*, by Bill Johnson; *Crafting Scenes*, by Raymond Obstfeld

MAP 12-1

Continued

11. Does the balance of your writing weigh heavily toward showing (about 80 percent) vs. telling (about 20 percent); active verbs (98 percent) vs. passive verbs (2 percent)?
Resources: *Description*, by Monica Wood; *Setting*, by Jack H. Bickham

12. Does your opening hook your reader with anticipation in the outcome, intrigue your reader with the originality of the story premise, and move your reader by evoking the unfulfilled yearning at the heart of the story?
Resources: *Beginnings, Middles, and Ends*, by Nancy Kress; *A Story Is a Promise*, by Bill Johnson; *The First Five Pages*, by Noah Lukeman

13. Do you know your theme; can you articulate it as a pitch that unites theme with characterization and plot?
Resources: *Theme and Strategy*, by Ron Tobias; *Stein on Writing*, by Sol Stein; *The Career Novelist*, by Donald Maass

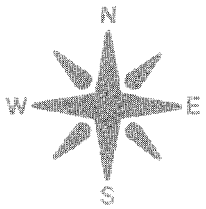
14. Have you written a working synopsis that you can later revise into a two or three-page marketing synopsis? Have you drafted a five-paragraph query letter?
Resource: *The Sell Your Novel Tool Kit*, by Elizabeth Lyon

Scoring:

If you answered yes to twelve or more of the preceding questions, your novel could be ready for final editing and revision. You can reasonably expect to find representation by a literary agent or interest by an appropriate publisher. If you checked less than twelve items, don't feel bad. Even experienced, sometimes professional, novelists, fall short of a perfect score in early drafts of their novels (or sometimes in

Continued

later drafts!). If any of your answers were no or "I don't know," your manuscript is not ready to compete in today's difficult marketplace. You will benefit by reading the resources provided, taking classes in novel craft, and hiring a professional editor when you have done everything you can on your own.



EAST

Your Rising Star

THIRTEEN

Learning to Market

Only she who attempts the absurd can achieve the impossible.
Robin Morgan

WRITING IS ITS OWN reward. Creating fiction feeds the soul, stirs the imagination, and delights the inner child. Writing fiction is more than craft; it's art. Art does not have to be sold or even shared in order to be of value. If you do not want to market your writing or are not ready to do so, go West, my friend. Skip this section and go to West. But if you are interested in writing fiction professionally, read on.

Successful marketing asks two things of the writer: skill and attitude. With time and practice, your skill will grow, but how professional is your attitude? As they say, "Attitude is everything." Answer the following questions—yes or no—as some measure of your readiness to market:

1. I'd rather get a root canal than market.
2. When I get a rejection, I question my talent and my sanity.
3. After I receive a rejection letter, it may take me days, weeks, or years before I market again.

You'll know you have a professional attitude when marketing is no big deal (you may even enjoy it), when you consider a rejection as

their loss, and when you have your next submission in the mail faster than that proverbial New York minute.

If you have primarily spent your time writing, it's no wonder that you might find the business end of publishing daunting. It's out of the comfort zone of most writers, but after a while, it's like any other skill you learn and then master.

In my prior book on marketing fiction, *The Sell Your Novel Tool Kit: Everything You Need to Know About Queries, Synopses, Marketing, and Breaking In,* I researched how fiction works get sold. Most of us are creatures of habit and tend to rely on the same marketing skills we learn early on. However, I discovered as many as seven common ways to sell fiction—some more preferable than others, and some not recommended unless you are a very lucky person. Here they are:

Not Recommended:

- Self-publication
- Sending unsolicited manuscripts

Recommended:

- Tap inside connections
- Win or place in contests
- Publish short stories
- Attend writers' conferences
- Mail query letters and manuscripts

An eighth way is the shotgun method—pursuing as many of the recommended ways as are within your capacity.

Self-Publishing

Miracles do happen. Self-published short-story collections or novels do sometimes get noticed by a publisher and go on to become

bestsellers. But not very often. The novels that do find this yellow-brick road are often inspirational or religious fiction. In my opinion, whether the novel is James Redfield's *The Celestine Prophecy*, Richard Evans's *The Christmas Box*, or Marlo Morgan's *Mutant Message Down Under*, most successful self-published fiction is really nonfiction lessons for living packaged into a fictional form. Their success derives from the uplifting or inspirational message to the reader who seeks and enjoys that. Rarely do the other genres of self-published fiction sell beyond a small circle of family and friends.

Interest continues to run high among my students and editing clients about electronic publishing, especially "on-demand" publishing. The idea of "on-demand" means that the book isn't printed and bound until a customer presents himself and forks over his Visa card, i.e., "demands" a copy. Relatively few Internet publishers use a downloading form of on-demand publishing. In this case, after the consumer pays to receive the book, he or she can download it directly into their computer. It's up to the consumer, then, whether to produce a printed copy. Hundreds of Internet-based publishers vie for the writer's dollar. Nearly all on-demand publishers require the writer to *pay* for the privilege of being published.

In other words, this is a form of self-publishing, or at best, minimal print-run publishing. It has its place. I think this form of pub-

P.O.D. PUBLISHERS

Trafford: www.trafford.com

IUniverse: www.iuniverse.com

Infinity: www.infinitypublishing.com

Lightning Source: www.lightningprint.com

Xlibris: www.xlibris.com

lishing is the next best thing to chocolate—dark, please—for a writer's spirits. It allows us to complete the circle from our imagination to an artistic form shareable with an audience. Almost every artist needs that. However, I don't see electronic publishing as a means to attracting the usual print publishers to your book.

Sending Unsolicited Manuscripts

I recommend against sending any manuscript to the "editor," without addressing your manuscript or query to the proper person, by name. A written query is a business letter introducing your book and you as a writer and asking for a response of interest. Writers of short stories should send their full manuscripts (most of the time) with cover letters addressed to the editor who is listed in one of the marketing directories, such as *Novel and Short Story Writers Market.* In contrast, writers of novels or short-story collections should *never* send a book or a partial of it to a literary agent or editor at a publishing house unless it has been requested. Otherwise, it is considered "slush," the sea slurry that slops over onto the deck of the ship—over the transom—and you don't want your work to be considered slush.

How do you get a request? There are two ways: Either the manuscript has been requested because you have met an agent or editor face-to-face, at a conference for instance, or you have sent a query letter that has brought a positive response, a request for the manuscript. Do not wait in the slush pile, as Taylor Caldwell is purported to have done for some ten years, before she wised up and was discovered.

These two methods, self-publishing and sending your manuscript unsolicited, rarely meet the writer's expectations for getting someone else to publish their works. By contrast, the next five methods maximize your efforts to break into print.

Tap Inside Connections

Do you have inside connections that may help you sell your short stories or novels? If you answer no or one or two, I advise you to work hard on cultivating many. You probably have connections you don't even realize. If you are acquainted with a published author, that's an inside connection. Attend author talks and introduce yourself after the presentation. Mention what you are writing and ask this professional if he or she can suggest a publication, agent, or editor. If the thought of doing this brings terror to your heart or seems too pushy or rude, get over it!

I have yet to hear of a writer being chastised for making a polite inquiry, but I frequently hear of positive results. One writer of the new form of magical realism that is called "stretched reality" spoke to an author she admired and was subsequently given a lead to this woman's agent, who also represents Alice Hoffman. The agent then accepted this writer as a new client.

Yet another writer I know spoke to a bestselling author after a speech, which led to sharing a lunch, which led to the author offering to edit the writer's mainstream novel—for a fee, and referring her to the author's agent.

Most of us who have been so fortunate as to have realized our publishing dreams received the same kind of help that you will be requesting. If the authors you approach treat you like pond scum, *they* have an attitude problem. You're merely practicing the fine art of networking, in the spirit of writers helping writers, and most authors will respond in kind and in kindness. Certainly, this is not the only way to get inside connections, and we'll discuss other ways further on in this chapter.

If the authors you approach treat you like pond scum, *they* have an attitude problem.

Win or Place in Contests

Of course you'd love to win, even place, in a writing contest. But the nominating committee for the National Book Award and the Pulitzer haven't come calling just yet. Aren't the chances of placement in any contest as likely as finding the Fountain of Youth?

Contests abound for all levels of writing skill and all types of writing. If you're a novice, enter one of the dozens of ongoing contests, with publication, in *ByLine Magazine*, which exists to give writers their starting point. Enter local contests sponsored by writing organizations in your city or region. When a friend of mine won a "Novel-in-Progress" contest sponsored by the Heekin Group Foundation (no longer active), she not only received a $10,000 grant, but her phone rang with literary agents calling her and asking when her novel would be finished and ready for sale.

Even if a contest win or placement gets noticed by no one, many of my students and clients have told me how the acknowledgment came at just the right moment to bolster their spirits and keep them working toward their dream of publication. Even a placement award in a contest, not just winning, is worth mentioning in a query letter or in a meeting with an agent or editor. Every bit of recognition helps position you as a professional rather than as a hobbyist.

Publish Short Stories

My former student, the now-published mystery novelist Carolyn Rose, built her credentials and confidence by entering small contests and seeking publication of her short stories. When she entered and won a mystery contest in *Dogwood Tales*, a journal with a few hundred subscribers, she received contributor's copies, acknowledgment, and publication in the magazine. Granted this was a small credit. However, she eventually amassed several small contest wins and publishing credits, including placing one mystery poem in *Ellery Queen's Mystery*

Magazine, a prestigious publication in the mystery world. In turn, her growing list of credits helped her sell stories to *Murderous Intent* (no longer in print), where Carolyn became a regular contributor with her name on the masthead. With a warm professional relationship with the owner/editor, Carolyn was in an ideal position when the owner founded Deadly Alibi Press. They launched Carolyn's first mystery series, publishing *Consulted to Death* followed by *Driven to Death*.

Her present success, which is still a springboard to a full-scale career as a novelist, began with pursuing publication of short stories. At each step, she said yes, worked hard, built positive relationships, and all of this in turn opened up larger opportunities. Rarely is a writer's path from unpublished to published a straight line.

Attend Writer's Conferences

From a marketing standpoint, writer's conferences represent a one-stop shopping venue open to every kind of writer at all levels of skill. If you go to www.shawguides.com on the Internet and click on "Writers Conferences and Workshops," you'll find nearly 1,400 of them in this country and all over the world. You can select a conference by month, year, state, region, or country. Some conferences and workshops focus on development of skill and others have a combined focus of skill and marketing. No matter what kind of conference you choose, you'll foster inside connections, which can be the most valuable method of all.

Larger conferences feature workshops in craft and marketing know-how, offer writing contests, host literary agents and editors, and schedule individual or group sessions where you can meet those with the power to acquire your works.

The rate of requests for manuscripts made at conferences is much higher than the 1 percent of query letters; I estimate the rate at about 60 percent. This makes conferences one of the best places to get your foot in the door, although the request for a manuscript only grants you consideration, not representation or a sale.

Another marketing secret about conferences is that you can pitch

to editors who ordinarily only consider submissions from literary agents. In this way, you can market to editors directly. If you get an offer of publication, you'll have no problem finding an agent eager to negotiate the sale and accept the 15 percent commission on all monies your book earns.

Conferences and workshops vary in cost, from barely a hundred dollars to several thousand. Budget for them and attend at least occasionally; they're a critical part of your education. They are lively marketing meccas, and you cannot replace them with book learning.

Mail Query Letters and Manuscripts

Any writer living anywhere in the world can successfully market a work of fiction via mail and e-mail. Different protocols exist for marketing short stories than for book-length fiction.

SHORT STORIES

The primary way that short stories are sold is by mailing them to the appropriate magazine or journal editor. You should include a cover letter, which is both a business correspondence and a first impression of your writing. It need only contain two paragraphs sandwiched between the salutation and the sincerely yours. The first paragraph should profile your story, offering its working title, number of words, and a one-line sketch of the story. For example:

> Enclosed is my 1,300-word story, "Tethered," showing how the rescue and care of an abused Pitbull gives an old woman the courage to go on living.

Your second paragraph should contain information about your writing successes and interests. It's also a good idea to indicate that you are a reader of the magazine or journal by saying something specific and complimentary about it. Politely, this is called salesmanship.

While you may get notification of acceptance or rejection by e-mail, always include a SASE (a self-addressed, stamped envelope).

Use marketing directories to find outlets for your short stories. Use broad, inclusive directories, such as *Writer's Market, Writer's Handbook, Novel and Short Story Writer's Market, Children's Writer's and Illustrator's Market,* and *Christian Writer's Market,* as well as specialty directories such as the *The Directory of Literary Magazines.* Additionally, once you begin searching, you'll find individual magazines for whatever kind of short story you have written—mysteries, romances, horror, sci-fi, fantasy, erotica, experimental, gay/lesbian, and more. Follow the guidelines for submission in these directories or magazines and you won't commit a faux pas.

A common mistake among short-story writers who have just begun to market is to seek publication with *The New Yorker* or *Atlantic Monthly.* Perhaps it is a rite of passage, like a fraternity initiation, to collect a rejection from these top-drawer magazines. I have mine.

Overestimation or naivete about the perceived excellence of our short stories seems universal among unpublished writers. The old adage, "Water seeks its own level" applies. Market to the highest paid and most prestigious publications if you must, and if you can be Teflon-coated to rejection. You can market your way "down" to your level.

The Internet has become a huge marketplace for short stories through the development of "e-zines." You'll find hundreds, perhaps thousands of e-zines once you tap in a search for your particular genre or interest area. E-zine publication is a legitimate publishing credit. Include it in all of your query letters, whether paper or via e-mail.

Or do your homework, match your writing level, style, and genre to magazines, journals, and e-zines that reflect these realities, and you'll publish sooner. Editors do respond favorably to writers with prior credits. You can always build on your successes and move up the prestige and payment ladder.

NOVELS AND SHORT-STORY COLLECTIONS

Do not mail your novel or short-story collection, or even a few chapters, to a literary agent or editor at a publishing house—even if you have a name—unless it has been solicited. What does solicitation mean? It means that the agent or editor has specifically asked to see your work. You may gain solicitation in person—most often by meeting at a conference—or in response to a query letter. Response to the query letter is the most universal way that agents and editors will request to see your writing.

Because literary agents report getting as many as 150 query letters a week, and the rejection rate is about 99 percent, your query letter must be the cream that rises to the top of those being considered.

The most important point to hold in mind is that your query is a showcase of your writing and a sales pitch that must compete to gain attention and positive action. It is not merely a business letter to dash off. I know some writers who have spent as many as forty hours polishing a single letter. If you have a critique group, submit your query to them. Consider hiring an editor to help you polish it. At least get someone other than yourself to proof it for the usual typos and "dumb mistakes." My book, *The Sell Your Novel Tool Kit*, provides a full discussion of the nuances of query-letter finesse, including examples and analyses of dozens of letters.

The query has structure—a lead, body, and conclusion. Use one paragraph for your lead, no more than three paragraphs (one paragraph if you can) for the body, and one for the conclusion. The lead can be straightforward or creative, but its purpose is to hook attention and raise the hopes of the reader that you may be the writer du jour. If an inside connection has referred you, then that referral should go in the lead. Put anything in this lead that will impress the heck out of the reader, items like contest wins or fellowships.

The body should contain a synopsis about your book and details about its genre and length. Map 13-1 offers step-by-step instructions for writing a killer synopsis.

The conclusion should toot your horn by listing your publica-

tions, studies, writing-related work, or at least what authors you read and enjoy, and perhaps a few titles or authors whose work your writing most resembles.

E-mail queries are becoming increasingly acceptable. Before you query by e-mail, you should confirm that this is acceptable by checking the agent's web site or by looking for acceptance of e-mail queries in the agent listings in a marketing directory. E-mail queries have all of the same content and structure as paper queries. The only difference is that they tend to be tighter and shorter, which almost always means better.

Each query letter is necessarily unique because there has never been a book just like yours or a writer who expresses himself just like you.

As you read the following example of a query letter, identify the protagonist, the story problem, what's at stake, and how the character will change. I've followed the query with analysis and commentary about it and the writer's experience.

Query for a fantasy novel

Dear Agent,

Adventure, mysticism, and romance are the driving forces in *The Stoneholders*, the first book in a contemporary fantasy trilogy. I'm contacting you because of your expertise in marketing science fiction and fantasy writers such as Janine Ellen Young.

In the desert of West Africa, television producer Angie Gale discovers Tahara, a village girl with the power to make her body disappear by using a mysterious green stone. In shock, Angie remembers finding an identical stone in her grandfather's home in Seattle as a child, and having the same unworldly reaction. Tahara tells Angie there are five stones, and only five people—five stoneholders—who can unlock their secrets. Angie's task is to find them and bring them together within six months, while passing her own tests of worthiness. The price of failure is high: death to the stoneholders and the destruction of mankind.

With her photographer, Uli, whose heart she must heal as one of her tests, Angie embarks on her quest. She meets a Hawaiian woman descended from kahunas who teaches Angie to face her fear, a boy monk in Nepal with whom she shares time travel visions, and a troubled fur trapper in Alaska who must overcome his own demons. Through her journey, Angie finds love, and with increasing awareness that the stones explain her lifelong telepathy and prophetic dreams, she fulfills her destiny by taking her place in humanity as a stoneholder.

My background is as a television writer and producer. Many of my stories have appeared on nationally syndicated programs. I've been honored with the most prestigious awards in television, including two regional Emmys and the Peabody award. My print pieces have appeared in *Electronic Media* and *Broadcasting and Cable*, the two leading television trade magazines. One of my creative pieces will introduce a book about Oregon, with a publication date of February 2002. This is my first novel. In crafting my fiction, I've participated in critique groups led by professional writers and worked with an editing service in the final drafts of the manuscript.

I've enclosed a one-page synopsis for *The Stoneholders*. I would be delighted to send you sample chapters or the entire manuscript, and look forward to your response. For your convenience, I've enclosed a SASE.

Sincerely,
Brenda Buratti

Analysis: This excellent query won agent representation for Brenda Buratti. Her lead demonstrates a business hook with a flare of salesmanship: "Adventure, mysticism, and romance are the driving forces. . . ." Notice how she personalizes the query with reference to one of the agent's successful authors.

The two-paragraph synopsis keeps its focus on protagonist Tahara and yet gives enough specific detail of the fantasy to allow the agent to assess its originality of plot. Can you guess what the protagonist

MAP 13-1

Elements of a Dynamic Synopsis
Key Ingredients: Emotion and Drama

DEFINITION: A synopsis introduces a novel's story promise. It describes how a plot carries out the story promise by a character who is driven by a core issue or need.

PURPOSE: As a planning tool, write a synopsis when you start your novel. Halfway through, rewrite it, and at the end of your first rough draft, rewrite it again. As a marketing tool, synopses offer shorthand overviews of your work to agents and editors, allowing them to diagnose weaknesses and determine if yours is a story they can champion.

1. Write the synopses in omniscient present tense. Use past tense only when referring to action prior to the story, or for intentional stylistic reasons.

2. Synopses have different lengths for different purposes. Use a one-page single-spaced synopsis to send with a first query letter. Use a five-page double-spaced synopsis when a synopsis is requested (with the query or with the manuscript). A synopsis as long as ten double-spaced pages may be used for large novels of great complexity (like *Shōgun* or *War and Peace*). In general do not send a longer synopsis unless you have agent/editor approval. Category romance writers should request and follow romance publisher's Writer's Guidelines.

3. Use active, strong evocative verbs and concrete, specific nouns.

4. You may use carefully selected bits of dialogue or quoted narrative *only if* doing so will heighten excitement; add to emotion, drama, or focus; capture character; or illuminate theme.

MAP 13-1

Continued

5. Synopses must contain the entire story: beginning, middle, and end. Make sure your story *is* plotted—not episodic. Include "plot points," the emotional turning points that often correspond to steps in the Hero's Journey (Joseph Campbell), and that echo the story promise. Leave out subplots unless understanding of the main plot depends upon them; then sketch only.

6. Open your synopsis with a statement of the story yearning, such as a narrative hook, or by showing it imbedded in action. Make clear your novel's setting, time period, background, and situation. Make this dramatic, colorful, and brief.

7. Introduce main characters with a short sketch. Begin with your protagonist and include the protagonist's story goal and what's at stake (rewards/losses). Indicate his or her "fatal flaw," the weakness that stems from a wound suffered in the past, and state the character strength that defines his or her heroism. Demonstrate how your protagonist is the driving force of the story. Sketch the antagonist and other main characters or integrate them into the plot summary.

8. End your synopsis showing what the character learns or realizes that supports fulfillment of the story yearning or theme.

most yearns for that defines the inner story motivation? I believe the query reveals this fantasy as a story of identity and, with that discovery, fulfillment of a destiny. Tahara's reward is twofold—saving mankind and finding love. Outer and inner.

The author's qualifications are strongly presented, even though she has not had a novel or short story published. The subtext for her qualifications related to television is that this author will understand book promotion and marketing.

Brenda closes with a warm paragraph that I call a handshake. Hers is a strong query.

Once an agent or editor requests your manuscript, a partial or the whole book, many will ask for exclusive consideration. It is up to you whether or not to grant that request. Either way, you should let the requester know your decision. Some writers and also some agents and editors believe that writers need not grant exclusives because so much time goes by and because most answers are rejections. They hold a competitive philosophy of "may the best man win." This is one of those gray areas where you have to make your own decision. I generally advise writers not to grant exclusives for partials but to grant them for whole novels. If you do agree to a request for an exclusive, supply a closing date after which you are free to market elsewhere.

When you get ready to send your requested manuscript, add a cover letter and remember to include your full contact information—your phone number and an e-mail address. Always enclose a self-addressed stamped envelope for the manuscript and instructions—whether you wish your manuscript to be recycled or returned. Review Map 13-2 at the end of the chapter for format and mailing instructions.

Finding Agents and Publishers

Finding markets for short stories is a matter of locating the magazine or journal that is a good match for your story by its genre, style, and length, using directories or the Internet, as indicated earlier.

But don't dash off a cover letter and manuscript to every possibil-

MAP 13-2

Standards of Format and Mailing

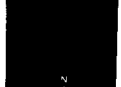
For short stories or novels, use the following guidelines for format and mailing.

PAPER, FONTS, AND FORMAT

- White, not colored paper
- Letterhead preferred for cover and query letters
- 12-point fonts with serifs (not Arial), fonts such as Century Schoolbook, Courier New, Bookman Old Style, Georgia, Garamond, Rockwell, or Times New Roman
- One-inch margins on all sides
- Text headers with your last name, title (or partial title), and page number (top right or bottom right)
- Double-spaced text with paragraphs and first line of dialogue indented five spaces
- Use of three asterisks separated by one space each, and centered on the line, for a "hard" hiatus, to signify a jump in time, space, or viewpoint, i.e., a scene change
- Use of two double spaces, i.e., four line spaces, to signify a "soft" hiatus, a change of scene with the same character and a slight change in time or place, or a change of viewpoint at the same time or place
- Consecutive pagination for chapters in a novel
- New chapters to begin on new pages with one-third head space, i.e., leaving blank the top third of the page before the chapter number or title
- Single-spaced cover or query letters with double line spaces between paragraphs and no indented paragraphs

MAILING

- Use standard business envelopes for query letters or for short stories of less than six pages plus the accompanying cover letter
- Fold letters and short stories into three same-sized folds



MAP 13-2

Continued

- Do not staple or clip papers
- For a finished, professional look, use your word-processing "label/envelope" function to address the envelope
- For stories longer than five pages and for short novels, use a large manila envelope or the envelopes provided by the postal service or shipping companies
- Enclose a self-addressed and stamped return envelope large enough for the manuscript's return
- For manuscripts that do not fit in these mailers, use a manuscript box obtainable at stationery stores and paper outlets
- Because any manuscript over one pound must be hand-stamped by a postal official, enclose a return envelope or manuscript box including the appropriate postage in stamps, not with a postal label

ity you find. Take the time to read the magazine or journal and determine if your story really is a match. Every magazine reflects individual editorial tastes in addition to specific genres and preferred lengths. You increase your chances of selling a story by matching your style and skill with that of the magazine or journal. Reading before mailing can be a laborious part of the marketing process. One of the biggest complaints from editors, however, is that writers don't read their magazines. Do your homework!

For novelists, all of the marketing directories mentioned on page 219, except for the *Directory of Literary Magazines*, also list publishers of books. Some also list literary agents. Most published novels are represented by literary agents. Two outstanding directories of agents are *Guide to Literary Agents*, updated annually by Writer's Digest Books, and *Writer's Guide to Book Publishers, Editors, and Literary Agents*, by Jeff Herman.

Should you market directly to editors at publishing houses or seek a literary agent? Generally, I advise the strategy of focusing on agents first and publishers only if you have exhausted your search for representation. Two or three, or ten or twenty rejection letters do not necessarily equal my definition of an exhausted search. You alone can determine how much time and rejection is enough. I have friends who have been rejected sixty times before finding their champion. If they had stopped with rejection number fifty-nine, they would not have met success. On the other hand, did they utilize all the recommended ways of marketing? Not necessarily. I strongly advise making direct, human contact with agents and editors, and that usually means attending conferences.

In the end, my answer to the question of marketing to agents or editors is "go with the yes." Wherever you get enthusiastic interest, follow it up. Because selling a novel is difficult, if a legitimate and worthy agent or editor raves about your novel, why not go with the yes?

My one caveat is that the person be "legitimate and worthy." Anyone can proclaim the role of literary agent and get listed in the directories. Not every agent can sell your book or even gain access to the editors who would be interested in it. Agents must build relationships

and prove their ability to recognize work that is truly ready to publish. I recommend that you find out as much as you can about an agent who offers to represent you, check the "Preditorsandeditors" web site to see if anyone has had bad experiences, and read chapter twelve in my book, *The Sell Your Novel Tool Kit*, about "30 Questions to Ask the Agent You May Hire." The one professional organization for agents, the Association of Author's Representatives (AAR), has guidelines for authors about selecting agents. Members must sell twelve books within a prior twelve months of seeking membership, and they must agree to a code of ethical conduct and accounting procedures. If an agent you contact is not a member of AAR, I recommend finding out why not. Consider hiring an agent as similar to hiring a contractor to work on your house: Check references. Ask questions. Get recommendations.

If you are unsuccessful in getting an offer to represent you from a literary agent and likewise unsuccessful in your queries to the large publishers who do accept non-agented inquiries, what can you do?

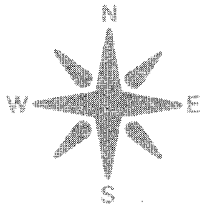
Often, novelists get fixated on large publishers, giant advances, and bestseller lists. There is a world of small publishers who may give you a start and provide a more satisfying emotional experience. Many authors describe close supportive relationships, even friendships, between themselves and editor-owners. You may not be able to quit that day job, but you may not have been able to quit it had you been published by a large New York publisher either. Small presses are untapped treasures by a large percentage of the novelists seeking publication.

Last of all, the top of the list of why novels are rejected by agents and editors alike is that they were not ready for publication. Donald Maass, an established and respected New York literary agent who is a former president of AAR and also, uniquely, a former published novelist, estimates ten years of diligent writing, study, and marketing as the average time it takes for a writer to reach professional skill. I agree. While I've had one editing client who reached publication within five years of writing his first words of fiction, I know many more writers who have put in over ten years and are still unpublished.

Every published writer was once a novice. Passion, belief in yourself, and hard work will get you to your goals. Talent and luck are but small parts of the process. Ask Stephen King, Dean Koontz, and Ray Bradbury how many years and/or how many novels they wrote before selling their first one. Ask Sue Grafton, J. K. Rowling, or Nora Roberts how many years and rejections they accumulated before they could make a living.

Becoming marketing smart will shorten the time it takes for you to break in once you have reached professional skill. Marketing smart means practicing your sales skills by following the recommended ways one can sell a novel. I have frequently asked published novelists if they knew about the high rejection rate, nearly 99 percent, when they marketed their first novels. To the one, the answer has been the same, "Yes, but I figured the statistics didn't apply to me."

As one of the creative arts, writing fiction is a deeply personal pursuit. Your success is not just dependent on mastering craft and marketing. In fact, it might not even be primarily about mastering these two. In the last section of this book, West, you'll learn how to keep awareness of your self in all its uniqueness and needs as a central part of your writer's journey.



WEST

Refining Your Vision

FOURTEEN

New Horizons

To find the point where hypothesis and fact meet; the delicate equilibrium between dream and reality; the place where fantasy and earthly things are metamorphosed into a work of art; the hour when faith in the future becomes knowledge of the past; to lay down one's power for others in need; to shake off the old ordeal and get ready for the new; to question, knowing that never can the full answer be found; to accept uncertainties quietly, even our incomplete knowledge of God; this is what man's journey is about, I think.

Lillian Smith, The Journey

AS MUCH AS WE writers yearn for the day we can gaze at a stack of papers of our stories and pat ourselves on the back for doing our best, that day rarely manifests. Yet, how you finish a story or novel is as important as how you begin it. It may even influence what you write next and whether you will continue to write. Before looking ahead, allow a process of emotional closure to your present work.

First Finish

Based on my own difficulty with finishing stories or novels and on my experience coaching writers, I know that the last ten-foot cliff to the

summit is the most difficult. Some writers literally stop directly before the climax of their stories, and others stop just after it but before the denouement, the wrapping up of loose ends and the final revelation of character change. Other writers finish the first draft but feel so inadequate about it that they consider it unfinished. They rob themselves of important confidence-building emotional rewards. Still others reach the last word only to immediately start over on the first page, continuing this first-to-last to first-to-last process in a Mobius strip of never-ending revision.

Writers often ask me, "How can I know when my novel is finished?" I've often quipped, "When someone grabs it out of your hands and publishes it." This implies several mistaken notions: 1) that publication is the criteria of "finished," 2) that unpublished always means incomplete, and 3) that the writer cannot know or decide on this crucial matter. My answer was glib, referring to the idea that anything ever written could be improved. However, the question deserves a serious answer.

For psychological reasons that I'll discuss later, failure to mark discrete endings can lead to problems. I believe writing holds a series of final steps, each of which is part of the completion process. A writer has finished the first rough draft when, after typing the last word of a story or book, he could add "The End." In my former critique groups, when someone read a final chapter of a novel or memoir, the group usually marked the occasion with applause and toasted the success with sparkling beverages. It fascinated me when an individual brushed off this celebration, eschewing any recognition of accomplishment. Yet, finishing a full-length book is a *monumental* achievement.

I urge you to think about when in the revision process you will call a story or novel "finished." This is tricky. Stories can be revised ad infinitum, so when are they truly done? Some say that when you begin to make changes back to your original version, you are done, or past done. Others say that when you're down to making small changes, a word or phrase here or there, you have finished.

Both of these suggestions have wisdom, but may not satisfy your

needs. After all, beginners can revise a same work for years and never reach a polished and professional level of "finish." Should they keep working on the same piece for years or decades? I have known writers who have done precisely that—put in a decade on a single novel. Paul, a man in one of my critique groups, had worked on one novel for twenty-five years prior to joining my group, only to put in another ten years. An established literary agent and former editor read his mainstream epic and commented on his brilliance and the power of his prose. The agent predicted publication and awards, but only after a major revision aimed at giving the primary plot more force and direction. Paul was unable to make the necessary changes because through decades of repetition, he'd dug deep ruts of habit he could not change.

The successful and prolific writing couple, Dean Wesley Smith and Kristine Kathryn Rusch, tell writers to revise no more than three times. That advice is not based on the assumption that the writing reaches perfection after the third revision; it is instead based on the probability that the writing is not finished and won't come any closer to perfection or being publishable by more revision. Smith and Rusch maintain that writers need experience in generating words more than anything else to develop publishable skill. Novices need to write many pieces—hundreds of short stories or dozens of novels—rather than limit themselves to what they could learn by revising only one novel or a handful of stories. I've also heard Dean and Kris stir controversy by saying that any revision beyond three robs a piece of its vitality and freshness.

You know you. You are the ultimate authority in finding what number of revisions works best. If you want to make one particular story into a life work, something that you spend decades creating, please consider writing many stories or novels at the same time or in tandem with this other work. What you learn from writing different pieces, each one unique in its challenges, will help you make that life work even better.

As a starting point for how often to revise, you can't go wrong picking a number out of a hat and adjusting it later. Perhaps you de-

cide to revise your short stories or chapters three times, but later you decide that on average you need to put them through six revisions. So be it. Henceforth, expect to revise six times.

Exceedingly common is the need to revise the beginning of a short story or novel more than the rest of the piece. Some writers revise their beginnings ten or twenty times, while they may revise the rest of a story only four or five times. Beginnings are tough. It's tough to find the right place in story time, tough to find the hook that engages the reader and reveals the protagonist's yearning, and tough to power the engine of plot in the most compelling way.

Once you set your mind on finishing a rough draft and limiting your revisions to a particular number or time period, you can then think about marketing. Once again, I am frequently asked, "How long do I market until I decide to give up?" Often, I see novelists who search for agent representation and suffer rejection letters give up too soon. This problem goes hand in hand with an emotional, versus professional, reaction to rejection, and with no prior determination of when to quit marketing. When to quit should be determined by market research: make a list of possible agents or publishers and have a series of fall-back plans should your Plan A fail.

Find out what number of rejections is typical for your circumstances, which includes your experience in writing and publishing, your genre and its popularity, and your connections. I have coached writers who thought that three rejections meant they had failed and should give up. Their perspective was a result of ignorance of what is typical in this business.

Let's say that you decide on twenty-five rejections by literary agents. What's Plan B? Literary agents primarily sell to the larger publishers; otherwise, their commission would not pay their bills. Would you find it acceptable if you were published by a mid-sized publisher? A small press? Most of these publishers appreciate queries directly from writers. The services of literary agents are not needed and sometimes get in the way. You may not get an advance, and your royalty over time may be small, in the hundreds or few thousands of dollars. Would that be an acceptable outcome for a Plan B?

What if Plan B meets with failure? Do you have a Plan C? Plan C might include marketing to on-demand publishers that acquire works and don't charge the author for publication. Some respected web publishers may not charge or may charge very little. Because you're unlikely to sell beyond your immediate circle of family and friends, decide if Plan C is acceptable should Plan A and B not work for you.

The point is that until you have created a marketing plan, you cannot know when to stop seeking publication. Here again, to avoid prematurely pulling the plug or getting caught in endless marketing that can wear down your spirit, make decisions ahead of time.

Orphans

All artists must spend years, perhaps decades, refining their art, often without financial or emotional support from our culture. However, visual artists can display their work and gain appreciative feedback, musicians can play to the pleasure of a crowd, and so forth. Writers can only share their works when they are disseminated through printing and distribution. Of course, family, friends, and fellow writers can and do read unpublished manuscripts.

Beyond gaining an audience for a given work, writers must deal with issues of motivation and self-confidence. I recently went on a week's retreat with some friends, including one fifty-seven-year-old former newspaper journalist who has been writing novels for thirty-seven years, with professional training for the last five. "At least I still have the fire inside," he said, "at least I still have the dream that keeps me plugging away."

All writers are prone to those haunting existential moments when they ponder the unanswerable questions: Will I ever see my work published? Am I fooling myself? Should I give up the dream and do something that brings immediate gratification?

When a novel that has been labored over for years fails to sell, it is like an orphan: abandoned, no home beyond the writer's heart. Frequently, the writer experiences all the feelings associated with the Or-

phan archetype, at least for a while. As far as I can determine, the only answer to orphans, the works, and their creators who feel abandoned and lose confidence, is a Zen-like refocusing on intention. Writing is creation, which has no need for justification. In a play on Descartes's famous maxim, I would say, "I am; therefore I write."

Most writers experience self-satisfaction through the creation of stories. They feel better when they write and worse when they don't. It is the art itself that nourishes them. When you have an orphan, a story or novel that you have been unable to publish, remember that external recognition is the "à la mode" to the cake. Experience the disappointment that any writer would when rejected—your fifteen minutes of heartache. Then, be at peace. Return to what you enjoy and must do. You are a writer.

Celebrating Completion

In stories from all cultures, journeyers mark the end of their sojourns with feasts, celebrations, and storytelling. I mentioned how in my critique groups we adopted the tradition of popping a cork and raising a glass to the individual who completed or sold a work. Similarly, newly published authors often host book-release parties.

Why celebrate? When you finish a work, you have reached the "Moment of Triumph" in your own hero/heroine's journey. The stack of pages represents the tangible evidence of success. At some point in the past, this work was but an idea in your imagination, and now you can hold, read, and share its fruition. I have no doubt that you encountered a "Road of Tests and Trials" and experienced every one of the markers in either the hero or heroine's journey. Dorothy allowed herself to be carried around Oz by the Munchkins as their victorious queen. What do you plan?

I urge you to celebrate every step of completion. Even though a short story takes less time to complete than a novel, you are still moving your career forward and building your portfolio of experience. Mark the occasion. Why not celebrate the halfway point in writing a

novel or when you finish each chapter? By all means, honor the completion of your first draft, the last revision, and the acceptance of your work by a literary agent and then by a publishing house.

Recognizing the Relationship

Your partner or spouse may have commented on feeling as if he or she is in a relationship with you *and* your book. It's easy to consider a writing project as a lover. You began with courtship, asking questions and getting to know your characters and story. Perhaps you did some exploratory writing before you decided this story qualified for your commitment.

With commitment, you married your story and struggled with adjustment to the "other," reaching compromises and finding comfort zones as you discovered, faced, and solved problem after problem. At times, you enjoyed being "in the zone," feeling confident, perhaps euphoric, over your writing process. At other times, you wondered why you thought you had a good story to begin with, perhaps considered quitting, getting a divorce, or straying to another story or book that danced before your mind's eye.

Because the terms of the relationship include saying goodbye when your story is done, you have to face the day when you wake up and do not dance with your muse. When writers finish a story, especially one as extensive as a novel, most experience loss; they often feel empty or at loose ends, a "betwixt and between" feeling. I've heard some women writers refer to "postpartum depression" after "giving birth" to their novels.

Allow yourself a letdown after completion, a time in which you neither badger yourself to market nor begin another work. After the celebratory feast, take a few days, a week, or longer and reconnect with family, friends, and other aspects of life. Your psyche needs a buffer to experience and move through separation and even grief. If you fill this time with hustle and bustle or dive right into another project, you risk sabotaging your long-term success.

Why? If you don't allow the natural stages of emotion their due, your psyche will handle that denial in ways that will dull your writing or your eagerness to create. If you don't leave room for your emotions at completion, then how can you write from the inside out on the next story? Creating stories is not like assembling a widget. Writing is art, and art has its roots in the deepest aspects of the self, in a merger of spirit and emotions with life experiences and the writer's interpretation of those experiences.

Because some novels absorb their authors for years, the adjustment after completion can involve all of the classic stages of grief: denial and numbness, anger, grief, appreciation, and finally acceptance. Even some short stories spring from such intense emotion that they deserve the respect of a full completion process. Knowing this, I hope you will allow yourself to experience whatever is true for you.

Gathering Meaning

Many, certainly not all, stories have an autobiographical component. You write about a particular character, theme, conflict, plot, or setting for a reason—even if you have not figured out the reason before writing your story. Now, after completion of it, why not contemplate the relationship of your creation to your self?

The motivations for writing are many and unique. Did you fulfill yours? Having figured out the story yearning for your protagonist, do you see any relationship to your own yearnings, such as for belonging, love, redemption, healing, understanding, or any of the other universal needs? Do you feel, in part or wholly, finished with some of your traumatic past and the associated wounds to your heart and spirit?

Even if your motive for writing is for money or to practice an aspect of craft or any other external reason, consider how writing your particular story affected you. Look again on pages 101 and 102 at the twelve archetypes identified by Carol S. Pearson. Think about your life when you conceived your story, or when you began writing it, and now at its completion. What archetypes best describe your expe-

rience at the beginning and at the end? For instance, consider what archetype best fits your experiences in family, intimate relationships, at work, in relationship to friends or avocations, etc., throughout the writing of your story.

When I began writing this book, for instance, I experienced writer's block for the first time in my life. As my paralysis deepened, I felt like the Orphan and wished I could go back home where someone else would take care of me. Part of me longed for the blissful ignorance of the Innocent, where all needs are provided. As the time ticked away toward the deadline, I had to summon the Warrior and find my ability to act, to set out on the journey of writing the book. At the same time, I continued to pour out energy through my Caregiver archetype—to family, friends, and my editing clients.

Once I began the journey and started to write in earnest, I faced gargoyles and dragons galore. Fall slipped into winter, and Oregon days grew short, dark, and wet. Typically, this time of year, I enter a cocoon, struggle with depression, and do best if I don't have to be creative. This time, with a March 1 deadline, I could not avoid the need to produce.

I realized that writing this book was also part of a larger process of my heroine's journey. I felt the strong beckoning call to leave my worldly obligations and refocus on an inner transformation. But I couldn't; I had a deadline. Ultimately, I reached a deal, a bargain with my shadow, the queen of the underworld. I would let her have me if she would let me complete this book.

Toward the end of the journey of writing this book, I became the Ruler, bringing order to the process of writing, finding discipline and focus, the dragons and gargoyles slain and no longer interfering. Although I experienced moments of the Sage, I identified with the Magician, constantly taking former concepts about writing fiction and seeking to express something deeper, more helpful, and more profound.

Mostly, I've felt like the Caregiver of you, my readers, hoping that you would feel empowered, encouraged, clear about how to write your stories and books. I urge you to think about your own writing

process and identify which archetypes have been active during the course of writing your stories.

The Chrysalis

In the beginning of any story, no matter its length, the writer makes many promises to the reader. But what promise does writing a story imply to the writer? Some stories have such power that they transform their creator. As if emerging from a chrysalis into a new form, the writer is made emotionally and spiritually anew. If you explore the depths of characterization, especially marrying your yearning and immutable truth with your protagonist's, you cannot help but be reborn through your writing.

Like your protagonist at the end of the hero's journey, you have a final test: Have you learned or grown by virtue of completing this story? In what ways have you changed? What new understanding about your self and life is your journey's treasure? In terms of the heroine's journey, whether you are male or female, have you come closer to a sacred marriage between the internalized Feminine and Masculine?

Once you answer questions of meaning and transformation, in light of your own growth instead of that of your reader, you are ready to look ahead toward your next project.

Capturing Butterflies

Before you finished your last story, another may have whispered to you and attempted to lure you away. Now, you may be able to give your all to this new creation and begin your next journey.

Other writers cast about for an idea and have problems finding ideas or problems deciding on one. It can be as difficult as capturing butterflies.

If this describes one of your difficulties, i.e., your net seems to have a hole in it, first make sure that you have allowed yourself the

reflective process described here for your last project. You may not be able to begin a new project because a deeper aspect of your self yearns for integration and meaning from your prior writing and stubbornly resists allowing you to move on.

Let's assume you have had a healthy completion after your last writing and you simply can't catch the butterflies. You don't wish to find merely a good story idea; you're searching for the *right* story idea.

Chances are, you often lived in the created world of your last story while you physically went through the motions in the real world. If you're like most fiction writers, you sometimes had mental conversations between your characters, visualized fights and battles, love scenes and tender moments, and allowed yourself to be transported to settings far from the one in which you literally walk.

Cultivate the fine art of daydreaming to find your next worthy story. Stop your activity, notice what you're imagining, and reflect on possibilities. Open up your daydream by asking the question "what if?" As you linger to watch the scudding clouds or the swooping dive of a bird, the butterflies will land ever so lightly within your consciousness. You'll capture a line here, an image there, and a character, conflict, or emotion will intrude.

If you don't already, carry a notepad to write down the odd fragments of ideas that you net. Don't let your analytical and critical self decide their worth. Simply capture them for later reflection.

For those of you who have learned how to remember your dreams and record them, the work of finding a next story worthy of your time and energy, as well as relevant to your personal exploration and growth, may come in the night. Remembering dreams and writing them down is a skill, and you can learn how to do this even if you have not previously done so.

I have some writer friends whose method of capturing butterflies is to do "free writing" immediately upon rising, before that first cup of coffee or tea, before turning on the TV and the world. By free writing, I'm referring to writing without any agenda or outline. You may want to make yours a timed writing—no less than ten minutes,

for instance. That is a lot of writing. Generally, the idea is to write about whatever enters your mind, be it ungrammatical, illogical, silly, sexy, ugly, reprehensible, or Pollyanna-ish. In other words, no matter what way you might ordinarily judge what you write, in the time of free writing, no holds barred; let 'er rip!

Nearly every writer I have talked with agrees that water is the best medium for the imagination. Showers, especially, seem to be chambers of daydreaming. In the days before dishwashers, I used to find washing dishes to offer the medium for a journey into imagination. Besides showers, or swimming if you include that in your daily life, walking may also loosen the holds on the mind and free you from left-brain, or literal, thinking.

Out of daydreaming and night dreaming, out of jotting down ideas as you have them, and out of free writing, you'll one day *know* you have that next idea. Instead of having a few butterflies as they light upon your consciousness, you'll feel as if you are the trees in Mexico when the monarchs descend by the tens of thousands. Once again, you'll find yourself being in this world but not *of* this world as characters, voices, and ideas take residence. It's time to write.

In the words of T. S. Eliot, "At the end of all our explorations, we shall arrive at where we started and know that place for the first time." It's time to prepare for the next story, your next writer's journey. It's time to make magic and prepare yourself for transformation and for being the agent of transformation in the lives of your readers. You have come full circle, back to your beginning.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

As an independent book editor, Elizabeth Lyon serves writers in the United States and abroad through her company, Editing International, LLC, www.4-edit.com. She's helped scores of writers get published and win contests, and she's seen a few secure movie options.

Lyon's first book for writers, *Nonfiction Book Proposals Anybody Can Write*, is considered the standard reference on preparing proposals. Literary agent Jean Naggar describes her second book, *The Sell Your Novel Tool Kit*, as an indispensable guide that belongs on every writer's bookshelf. *A Writer's Guide to Nonfiction* was the first book in this Writer's Compass series.

As an instructor and speaker, Lyon is known for her clear, practical instruction, inspirational encouragement, and good humor. A contributor to *The Writer* magazine and *Writers Digest*, Lyon also writes articles, columns, and essays for newsletters and online e-zines. In addition, readers may find helpful tips posted at her author website: www.elizabethlyon.com.

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