

Writer's Block Party

A blog about writing and publishing

CRAFT

Why I Love Endings (And Also Hate Them)

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The End.

Small words, three letters each. But when you put them together, wow are they big. The conclusion, the finale, the denouement. Powerful, shocking, bittersweet, heartwarming. An ending can be so many things.

I'm not going to say the ending is the absolute most important part of a story; beginnings are important, too, because they hook the reader and set up the story; middles are the meat, the protein, and [my fellow contributors can tell you why they love them](https://writersblockpartyblog.com/2020/10/06/why-we-love-writing-the-middle-of-stories/) (<https://writersblockpartyblog.com/2020/10/06/why-we-love-writing-the-middle-of-stories/>). But endings are special. Endings define—and sometimes redefine—everything that came before. It's the final taste in a reader's mouth, and it can be sweet, satisfying, savory, bitter, sour, or perhaps worst of all, it can be plain. Just, meh. The beginning might pull the reader in, but the end is what has them hugging the book to their chests, or throwing it across the room. I truly believe a good ending can absolve a so-so beginning or somewhat soggy middle; I'm not sure a near-perfect beginning can do the same for a bad ending.

That's not to say that a good beginning doesn't matter (and when it comes to things like querying, it very much matters), or that a so-so ending will completely ruin a book. But think about it. You've probably heard both scenarios when listening to a book review: "It took me a while to get into, but then it got **really** good, and that ending!" vs. "It started off so good, but the ending just wasn't satisfying."

This is why I both love endings, and also despise them. There's a hell of a lot of pressure to stick the landing. And really, who wants to be defined by one single moment?

The ending is the solution to the problem the author has presented. The thesis first stated at the start of the novel, or series, fulfilled. But it's not so simple as solving for x. Just like with writing overall, there's no right way to write an ending. However you do it, here's three key elements to keep in mind when crafting your ending:

1. Good endings are satisfying

What kind of story are you trying to tell? A tragic one? A happy one? One that's a little bit of both? Put another way, what kind of journey do you want your character (and your audience) to go on?

There are so many kinds of endings: the surprise ending, the happy ending, the tragic ending, the cliffhanger ending, the ambiguous ending. No matter what kind of ending you go with, it must satisfy the arc of your main character's journey, and therefore the reader.

Think of an ending that stuck with you—it could be a book, a TV show, a movie, a play. Maybe it stuck with you because it was powerful and poignant and made you cry. Maybe it was abrupt and upsetting, and you absolutely hated it. Whatever emotions you were feeling—most likely the writer, or director, wanted you to feel that way. They chose their ending with precision, so the final note would reverberate long after you turned the page or left the theater, for better or for worse.

Here, in no particular order, are a few endings that I find sticky (no spoilers, don't worry): *GONE GIRL* by Gillian Flynn, *ARRIVAL* (movie), *THE BOOK THIEF* by Markus Zusak, *FAST COLORS* (movie), *ON THE JELlicoe ROAD* by Melina Marchetta, *SE7EN* (movie) *CODE NAME VERITY* by Elizabeth Wein, *STATION ELEVEN* by Emily St. John Mandel, *THELMA & LOUISE* (movie), *THE SCORPIO RACES* by Maggie Stiefvater, *TURN OF THE KEY* by Ruth Ware, *ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND* (movie), and basically anything written by Courtney Summers

If you've read these books or seen these movies, you might be thinking some of them are not satisfying at all. But I think the problem is we sometimes confuse **satisfying** with **happy**. A satisfying ending is not always a happy one. Sometimes it's bittersweet. Sometimes it's terribly sad, even disturbing.

A satisfactory ending sums up what you've been trying to say for however many pages. It brings your main character to the destination of their journey, whatever that may be. Good triumphing over evil. Joy despite suffering. Peace and contentment. Hopelessness in the face of a broken world. Hopefulness in the face of a broken world.

A satisfactory ending makes you feel something, the stronger the better. It has impact. Make your readers feel something.

2. Good endings meet, or sometimes subvert, expectations

You're making a promise when you begin a story. There's a difference between *Once upon a time*, and *It was a dark and stormy night*. Already, you probably have an idea of how the rest of those two stories would go.

If a story began the first way and ended with everyone dead, you'd be surprised and not in a good way.

That's not to say you can't subvert expectations. A great example of an ending that did this in recent memory is the first Iron Man movie.

[Spoilers, but like, it's been out for over a decade.]

When Tony Stark said, "I am Iron Man," at that press conference, it was unexpected, surprising, and fresh. Not because it's the opposite of what we've come to expect from Tony (and in fact is exactly what we expect from him), but because it turned a time-honored superhero genre trope on its head: the secret identity at all costs.

Now, there are certain genres that have built-in expectations. A mystery needs a good ending because it has the answers, and the answers need to be interesting, satisfying, maybe shocking, but ultimately make sense. The same goes for a thriller, which are often of the shocking twist variety. Similarly, a romance must have a happy ending. It could be bittersweet and quiet, or hard won and dramatic—but if it's not happy, it's not truly a romance, and readers familiar with the genre will be unsatisfied. (Hey look, element number one coincides with element number two.)

Here is an argument against the importance of endings; if a reader knows the ending will be happy, then where is the tension? Why even bother reading?

As a wise woman once said, "It's the climb."

Put another way, it's not the destination, it's the journey. And it's true. Part of what makes a satisfying ending is everything that comes before. You might know the two leads will ultimately end up together, but *how* that happens, the things they have to go through and learn and overcome, that's why our heart goes all pitter patter when they finally do end up together.

That's an essential aspect of a good ending—it has to be earned. Which brings us to the final element.

3. Good endings feel inevitable

Now, this is kind of a cheat because it's a summation of elements #1 and #2. The best stories have gravity—their momentum pulls you toward the end. It might be a breathless, whirlwind of a ride, or something more gentle, like the tide, but there's a natural trajectory. When you come to the end, you look back and realize this is where you were headed all along. The final stop is obvious, but only once you've reached it.

Even the surprise twist endings feel inevitable, because the writer has scattered all the clues throughout the story—might have even given you the answer on the very first page. In a subtler, more abstract way, the same is true of a happy ending or a sad one. The clues are the choices your character has made, the world you've built up around them, or torn down. Like I said, the ending is the solution. All the pieces have to add up.

What I'm saying is, you have to work for it.

Even if you're writing the first draft with the ending in mind, you're not going to nail it in one go. Writing is revising, and a lot of revision is making your ending sing. Yes, it's about tightening the pacing and filling plot holes and strengthening your character arcs, but what's the point of all that really? You're altering the path your readers will take so they come to the right destination. They can turn around and see the journey really was worth it, one they'd gladly take again, because damn, what a view.

So how do I end the post on endings? So much pressure!

I guess I'll say this: I think the best endings—or at least my personal favorites—are also beginnings. The end of one journey, but the start of another. Think CASABLANCA. "Louis, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

Even at the end of SE7EN, which is unarguably devastating, Morgan Freeman's character, who for so much of the film was disillusioned, ready to leave detective work behind, says he will stick around and look after Mills (Brad Pitt). The film ends (and this is not the spoilery part) with his voiceover and a Hemingway quote: "*The world is a fine place, and worth fighting for.* I agree with the second part."

Your characters, if you've done it right, will feel like real people with lives that bleed past the margins. And unless you kill everyone off (which happens), they'll keep going beyond the final line, if only in our imaginations. The end is not a wall, but a threshold.

Consider the most classic of all endings: *And they lived happily ever after.*

Seems final, yeah? Except there's that implication: **they lived**. The end is where we leave them, but not where they leave us.

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