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Welcome to the sixth installment of 'Becoming a Better Writer'. An investigation into the art of creativity --in ten easy lessons!

The Easy Way to Write a Novel
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Lesson 6:

I Can't Put It Down!

How many times have you heard people say this about a book? Have you ever analyzed the books that people say this about?

I have.

They all share one 'secret' in common.

Questions.

Reading is not a passive exercise. Not to the brain, anyway.

As you read and take in the information on the page, the brain is trying to work out where the story is going, what significance certain actions might have.

It's also trying to work out puzzles and generally try to second-guess the plot.

This is human nature. It's what makes reading an interactive experience--where you have a kind of relationship with the author for as long as you're reading

Stories that don't make the reader ask questions are unsatisfying to read, as are stories where the reader guesses the outcome.

Many writers forget this and write aimlessly in the hope that the reader will like their style and want to read on, no matter what.

This is not a strategy for success! In order to be in control of your story--and your reader, you, the writer should feed them questions.

This is not as difficult as it sounds.

First you need the major question--your book's reason for being, if you like.

This is something my book covers in detail but in essence it's the 'theme' of your novel summed up in one sentence.

Questions like 'Does money create happiness?' or 'Will good triumph over evil?' You should subtly place this question in the mind of your reader quite early on in your book, so that the reader is already on a kind of quest for the truth.

Next you have chapter questions that are more specific to your characters. Like 'Will Alex overcome his problems?' or 'Will Sally win the love of her father?' This gives your reader a reason to read on--just to find out!

Then, you should have smaller questions at every point you can - at least one every 500 words.

Here's an example:

'Lucy went to see her father. He was angry that she was seeing Brad but she told him there was nothing he could do about it'

Obviously this is flat and lifeless prose that invites no great speculation. How about this?

'Lucy stared at her father's implacable face. When he was like this, she couldn't gauge his feelings. She swallowed hard. If he was angry, she'd end up with nowhere to live. 'I won't stop seeing Brad,' she said, not quite believing her own words.'

You see the difference?

In the second passage the reader is forced to ask three questions.

1. What's her father thinking?
2. Will Lucy get kicked out?
3. Will she carry on seeing Brad?

Rather than simply stating what your characters think and do, always try to leave an element of uncertainty in the reader's mind as to what will happen next.

The trick is to get your reader asking questions constantly. Yes - on every page, so that there's a compulsive need to turn the page, if only to find out the answers.

Good novelists do this unconsciously--they know it's the best way to tell a story.

Good crime novelists deliberately get you to ask all the WRONG questions so that their plot twists are far more effective.

People keep turning the page in best selling novels because they are in a constant state of limbo--ignorant of what's coming next but eager to find out. In effect, it's almost a state of agitation, even frustration that will keep a reader turning the page.

Has this happened to you?

It's weird because you almost HATE what you're reading--there are so many unanswered questions--but you just can't put it down!

2004 robparnell

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Best regards and keep writing.

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Creating Better Writers
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PS: Next time, Why Fiction Matters!

Till then, keep well and happy.

Ciao

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