

Color Coding the plot

Someone asked if I ever use color codes on my plotlines.

Usually I don't do this until I'm deep into the story and deep into trouble. I write what's been described as 'twisty' plots, which results in lots of little loose ends that all need threaded through the entire novel.

I color code out the plotline on a separate sheet of paper usually, with each thread a different color (yes, one must buy many colors for it to work).

I write out something like this:

Ukiah returns home from Oregon and immediately called into case of missing person. (the scene)

Ari tells them about missing children (red)

Ari tells them about homeland security (blue)

Mention that Ukiah went through unexpected growth in Oregon to start I'm-not-a-kid-anymore plotline (green)

Ukiah and Max return to office after finding kid.

Sam has left message on answering machine(yellow)

Homeland has left message on answering machine (blue)

Accountant has left message about taxes and dealership left message about new car (green/yellow -- note: this is why Max can't pick up Sam)

As you can start to see, I can tell when the various threads are mentioned in the book and follow all the stages needed for them -- set up, conflict, resolution -- as they move through the outline. If I'm missing one section of it, I can see more clearly where one thread has been dropped and where it needs to be inserted. For example, if the first time Sam (yellow) is mentioned is where her conflict of "why didn't you tell me you were a millionaire/is this relationship going to work" comes to a head, I know that I need to back up and start doing set up for her somewhere -- which is the phone message.

Comments

Interesting technique. Any way to apply it via a computer?

Well, if you don't mind shelling out 70 bucks, you can get the computer program Inspiration (or there's a free thirty-day trial of the program on their site.) As I understand it this is educational software intended for kids, but I use it for plotwork because it's such

a very good brainstorm machine, and because I also tend to write "twisty" plotlines for which traditional outlines don't work.

And, yes, it can color-code, which is nice.

And, jeez, is it nice to know that other people plot this way. I was starting to think I was the only one in the world who couldn't write off an outline. *grin*

I haven't been able to figure out outlines either--hated them as a kid in school, and they don't do much for me now for writing.

I do have Inspiration and have only used it a little bit. I believe I'm going to find it most helpful. (Did my entire NaNo novel off an Inspiration brainstorming session from the trial version. When the trial expired, I decided to buy it to get my brainstorming session out in time for NaNo. *grin*) If you're not sure this will work for you, try the trial version. The full version also comes with some interesting (and potential useful) writing templates. I didn't see the templates in the trial copy.

Color Coding Plots -- part two

Another post made me add to the whole color coding scheme.

I use paper because there's no "come on stupid program, do what I want" and I use BIG paper, usually like 3 foot by 3 foot. What day it is often important in my books, so I often draw lines down to indicate the day has changed and label "Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday..." across the top. Bitter Water was set in a seven day time period, and Dog Warrior was only like five days.

I don't shift colors because the idea is to MAKE IT SIMPLE and QUICK.

I do big scenes -- the whole first scene is actually wading through a flooding sewer system to rescue a lost boy -- and I jump around and I write out of order.

What I detailed out was all the little steps you need to back up and fill in so the reader can build to the big scene.

For example, the first scene I wrote for Bitter Water was Ukiah picking up Sam and her throwing a fit because in all of Tainted Trail, Max never mentioned he was a multi-millionaire. Cool scene, but it didn't work as a first scene of the book. It focused on Sam, not Ukiah.

Back up, and write the "down in the sewer" scene. Cool -- it worked as first scene of the book because it introduced the HERO, not the sidekick's love interest.

Now I had to bridge the gap. First, who is Sam -- not only do I have to get in the whole back story of her relationship with Max, but also that of how they met and why she's coming to Pittsburgh. Also why didn't Max go and get Sam himself?

Solution? They get to the office and there's phone messages. One from Sam to set up who she is. A second one to set up why Max will be too busy to pick her up when the car she's driving breaks down just short of Pittsburgh. Each phone call is only a paragraph or two long but are important foundation stones for bigger issues -- triggers so to speak.

If you're going to jump around, you need to write, and then consider what would lead to this situation and do little details and plots to create the threads that will run through the big scene.

Lastly, because I have lots of big scenes and then these little scenes doing fill, I make the little scenes work hard. Not one addresses just one plot point, and each is as interesting as I can make it.

Back to the telephone calls after the sewer scene. In the book, this is three pages. Ukiah and Max walk into the offices after a thrilling adventure in the sewers. Tension of

the plot is dipping down, but I don't want it to hit the floor. Law number one -- build tension like a strong stock market -- lots a little dips down but always building upward.

First call -- one page, five paragraphs -- dealership calls saying new car needs picked up. Ukiah reflects that before he left for Oregon, he didn't care about this, now he wants to be more part of the business. Max growls that their part-time help is letting things fall through the cracks -- thus the need for someone like Sam to join the business. Lastly it gives me someplace for Max to disappear to when I want Ukiah alone.

Second call - one paragraph -- accountant wanting to talk about quarterly taxes -- once again, Ukiah growing up and Max disappearing.

Third call -- three paragraphs -- Sam calling to say she's in Wyoming. First paragraph tells Sam is the private detective they met in Oregon and they hired her to bring a car back to Pittsburgh. Second paragraph -- the last time they saw her was this morning when Max kissed her goodbye (Yes, plant ROMANCE with one word) and hoped that he will be able to talk Sam into joining the detective agency while she's in town. Third paragraph gives an ETA for Sam's arrival -- you want the reader to know, sometimes, what will be happening in the future.

Fourth call -- one page -- a series of hangups with no messages. After checking the caller ID, they realize that these are all from Homeland security. Being that Ukiah is half-alien, this could be very BAD for him, but there's no message to explain WHY Homeland is calling. This brings the tension back up and leaves a mystery to hang over the two until the Homeland agent appears.

With the fourth call ending on a tension filled note, I can now do laid back stuff with Ukiah's family and friends and just poke back to this plotline to remind reader of the drawing doom.

I came up with the phone calls as a logical thing you would have after being gone from home/work for two weeks. By doing the color codes, I knew which plot threads needed to be run through this small section and make them lean as possible. By keeping them very lean and ending with the tension builder, I kept them interesting.