

A discussion on plotting a novel as an organic writer...

by Wen Spencer

I'm very organic and messy and usually throw away as much as I keep.

Generally, I start with a very general outline. The most important points of this outline is the start and the finish. Without an ending in sight, its impossible to stay on course. I also need highlights -- cool scenes that will probably fit into the plot line.

All in all, I call it my "Trip to Disney World" plotting. Certainly you can't get into a car and start driving without know where you are in relationship to the park -- the beginning of the book -- and you can't stay on course without knowing where the park is located -- thus the end of the book. The various landmarks are all the points of interest between you and Disney World, but if you stop is all up to your interest and how much time you have.

When I start to write, I think of the book in three segments: set up, middle, end. I usually don't worry about knowing in detail what the middle is while I start setup. I need to hammer down who the main characters is, what type of world this is, and where this novel is going.

If I was truly writing a trip to Disney World, the set up would introduce the reader to the POV characters, their life on Earth sometime after the opening of Disney World, with a desire to visit Disney, and now -- the point of change that triggers the trip -- the means to go. I also have to introduce whatever conflict will be happening throughout the entire book. What problem is this trip going to solve? Am I trying to show the family's determination despite their dysfunctional makeup, ala National Lampoon's -- or is this the dying wish of one of the terminally ill children, and Disney World will be the last time the family will be together or is the POV trying to discover where the next serial killer will strike? The various building blocks are put forth and the POV leaves familiar ground behind.

The end, of course, is the point that all main conflict is resolved. I usually have that scene in mind, and sometimes I write it out rough to keep it in focus. However, writing like taking a car trip, is part exploration. I can't marry myself totally to that rough draft ending. On the other hand, the set up does make certain promises to the reader. If you tell the reader that the family of the terminally ill child **MUST** leave for Disney World to make things good -- then stopping at South of the Border just doesn't cut it.

The middle is far more nebulous than the Set Up and end. Since I usually write mysteries, I think of the middle is the point where the POV (and with them the reader) now knows enough about what is happening to act instead of react. For example, in LOTR, Frodo flees the Shire in front of forces of evil -- he's reacting because he doesn't know enough to act. Once he reaches the elfin town, he know has enough information to act -- to volunteer to take the journey. Once he makes that decision, he moves the plot to

the official "middle". Of course in LOTR, the middle is 1000s of words long. ;-)

One of the beauties of writing in three parts is that you can keep an eye on pacing/word count. A standard standalone sf novel runs around 100,000 words. Each section should be in the neighborhood of 33,000 words. I try to introduce all plot threads in the first 33,000 words as Set up, but its okay to introduce small elements in the Middle. Once you hit 66,000 words, however, you know its time to start wrapping up plot threads, not introduce new ones.