

Treasure ho! Mapping Your Way to Story

*“Write Your Novel Now”
r. r. campbell | Fall 2019, UW Writers*

Overview and Recap

- Let’s talk scene
- Share two good scenes
- Share two scenes you’re “stuck” on
- Any other questions?

Structure is great, but...

- It’s only one of many important facets to story
- Character is key, too
- But what *is* character?
 - More than our [adjective(s)] + [noun] formula
 - To understand a character, we need to know
 - What they want
 - Covered in concept
 - How far they’re willing to go to get it
 - Perhaps implied in concept ([consequences])
 - What they fear

Exercise: Take a moment now and consider what your protagonist fears. Is this consistent throughout your manuscript? Does it change over time? How does your protagonist view this change (assuming they recognize it at all)? What might they fear not just generally, but within scenes themselves?

- Characters are also *flawed*
 - One of these flaws *must* be “fatal”
 - Does not mean the flaw poses a truly mortal threat
 - But it could lead to a “death of the soul”
 - Or the flaw at least leads to a flirtation with death
 - Simply put, the fatal flaw is a single character trait that trips up our character at every turn and leads them down the road to ruin
 - Oftentimes, this flaw is actually an *asset* as well
 - **Examples**

- *Accounting for It All* – Robin’s dishonesty and selfishness acts as a shield... until it doesn’t
- *Imminent Dawn* – Chandra’s selflessness empowers her to help others... until she takes it too far and that selflessness causes her to sacrifice more of herself than she’s comfortable with
- *Room* – boy’s sense of appreciation and love for the “Room” shields him from how truly dire his situation is... until that love is tested
- *Game of Thrones* – Ned Stark is an honorable man. This permits him to build up quite the reputation and gain the respect of countless people. In the end, however, his sense of honor leads directly to his demise.

Exercise: What is your protagonist’s fatal flaw? Can you see how it runs through your scene-by-scene (or plot) outline? If not, how might it come into play?

“Okay, but how do I get started?” – Opening Pages

- Outlines are (obviously in my view) helpful
- And having a sense for our characters before we write can be as well
- But what about... actually writing? How do we start?

The Ordinary World and Call to Action

- We begin with either our “you” or “ordinary world”
- But how much time do we spend here? Not much.
- **Challenge:** get the inciting incident on the page *in the first five pages*
 - What’s an inciting incident?
 - Can be the “call to adventure” or “need” step
 - But it doesn’t have to be
 - Could simply be a follow-through on the “disturbance in the force” that will lead to the above
 - Why do this in first five pages?
 - Reader attention spans
 - Creating a sense of momentum
 - Playing the agent game
 - Page requests

- Demonstration of your writing “chops”
 - We’re more than ordinary worlds, after all
 - Need to flex those writing muscles
- Remembering *Far From You* (Tess Sharpe) and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (Khaled Hosseini)

Exercise: How will you get your inciting incident in your first five pages? What will that incident be? Will it coincide with the “call to adventure” or “need” step? Why or why not?

Everything After – Maintaining Tension Throughout

- Conflict versus tension
 - Conflict as arising as a result of opposing forces
 - Thinking back to collaborative and conflicting goals
 - Tension as coming from “the unresolved”
 - Ergo, all conflict will have some tension (we need to see which opposing force “wins”
 - But not all tension comes from conflict
 - What does it come from, then?
- Mystery, Suspense, and Dramatic Irony
 - Mystery
 - Our characters know something the reader does not
 - We sense that a character is “up to something”
 - Their actions convey this to reader
 - The character knows what they’re doing, but readers don’t have full details on *what* or *why*
 - A new character is introduced, and we suspect they’re someone important despite not having stated themselves as such
 - Idea is to get readers *making predictions* and then to have them hang in there to see if their predictions turn out to be true
 - Importance of stretching tension as much as possible (and as much as is reasonable)
 - Suspense
 - Characters and readers have access to (or a lack of access to) the same “information”
 - Will this character disarm the bomb in time?
 - Who is lurking around the corner? Is it the murderer?
 - If our character doesn’t know, and we don’t know, this is suspense

- Alternatively, let's say our character has uncovered the identity of the bad guy (they *know* something)
 - And in this case, we know it, too, because we "saw" them make these connections
 - We still have suspense on the page when our character goes to confront the bad guy (what will happen when confrontation occurs?)
 - We also had suspense in the lead-up to the uncovering of the bad guy's true identity, as we were on the same (literal) page as our character
- Again, when we have suspense, readers *make predictions* and want to see those predictions affirmed or dismissed (mostly affirmed).
- Dramatic Irony
 - Readers know something that characters do not
 - A story kicks off in NYC on 9/11/2001
 - Or consider *A Thousand Splendid Suns* again
 - Mary's "ticking clock" of WWI set to begin
 - In this case, readers are *making predictions* about how our characters will confront some known entity
 - Predictions are about how our character will respond when they are faced with this new information, event, or obstacle
- All of these help readers remain *engaged* with our work.
 - They become active participants
 - They're not just watching a train go by, so to speak, they're trying to get on and stay on that train
- Where writing and revision is concerned, if a scene feels stuck, let's ask ourselves whether we have any mystery, suspense, or dramatic irony on the page (or some combination thereof)
 - If not, it's time to reexamine how to get that tension on the page
 - If we do have some of the above, are we draping it over the whole scene?

Detours, Pit Stops, and Inclement Weather: The Importance of Flexibility

- So you've got a great trip planned. Congrats and happy travels!
- Hitting the highway and all is well until—
 - A roadside amusement beckons
 - Do you take a side trip?

- Pit stops versus tourist traps
 - How do you know which is which?
- The dangers of distraction
- Thunder strikes! When weather slows you down...
 - What is weather?
 - Lack of clarity on character
 - A secondary character shines brighter than main character
 - Logical inconsistencies (plot holes)
 - Life just getting in the way
 - What do we do about weather?
 - Pulling to the side of the road
 - Taking the next exit
 - Driving to the far side of the storm
- Construction slows or impedes progress
 - A trip itinerary isn't a cure all
 - It can help build confidence and provide direction
 - But we still have to do the driving, which can be slow-going at times
 - Remember, though, it's not just about the destination, it's about the journey, construction and detours included
- Important to note: an itinerary (outline) is not a contract
 - This is *your* adventure, too, so make of it what you will

Photo Albums and Journal Entries: A Story and Strategy Retrospective

- So you've finished a first draft. What a trip!
 - Did you take pictures along the way?
 - Were you journaling about your experience? The things you saw and did?
- Reflecting on the past to plan for the future
 - There are more trips ahead
 - But first you'll be spending *a lot* of time evaluating your most recent journey
 - Seriously, revisions are about 80% of the work
 - They're also the best part, in my opinion!
 - While drafting, revising, and reflecting on that process—
 - What did you find worked for you about using this process?

- What have you adapted to better suit your strengths?
- What have you discarded? How will it help you going forward both with your revisions for this project and when beginning a new one?
- The importance of beta readers, editors, and critique groups
 - Other folks have been on journeys similar to yours!
 - Let their own insights inform how you might approach your next steps

Feedback and Staying in Touch

Feedback for you!

Feedback for UW Continuing Studies

Future Opportunities

- Editing Services
- Additional Courses and Seminars
- Newsletter

Staying in Touch

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THANK YOU!

WRITE ON AND WRITE WELL.

