03. Developing Ideas

Let's say you have a wonderful idea for a novel. How do you develop it into something that will be a hundred thousand words that the reader can't possibly put down? For me, as I said in the previous lesson, it generally begins with a single paragraph that states the big idea, the single question from which everything else will follow.

How do I develop that idea? I simply ask myself questions. Who are these people? Where do they come from? Why are they involved in this situation? What do they want in life? What was happening before this plot began and what do they hope will happen afterwards?

Each new question supplies you with more detail, but also suggests dramatic developments for the story. But to answer this question in more detail, I looked at two of the notebooks I used to write *Never*.

At the beginning it's scrappy. There's a list of experts I might consult. There's a timetable for writing the outline itself. The first notebook starts in June. The first summary of the story is five paragraphs, then every day I add to it and the process begins to accelerate. Next time round it's a page and a half, and by the 20th of August it has grown to six pages, getting longer and longer as I elaborate the story.

By October, where I have all the characters trying to prevent a nuclear war, the outline is twenty or thirty pages, and that's a lot of the hard creative work done. I do the outline longhand. I have the developing story on the right-hand page and as new things occur to me, I put a note on the left-hand side in a different colour and link it with a code.

I also draw diagrams. *Never* is a complex plot involving many countries, so I mapped out the relationships between them.

One thing you should give very careful thought to is how to start your book, because you really need to start with a bang. By the end of the first chapter the reader must be totally committed to reading the whole thing.

One of the greatest openings, in my opinion, is in *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown.

At first you think it's a routine detective story set in Paris. There's a body in the Louvre. There's a grumpy French detective, his gorgeous assistant, and an American expert. Naturally you expect the grumpy French detective to be a total failure and the American expert to solve the mystery and go to bed with the gorgeous assistant. But even as you are smugly working this out, the gorgeous assistant takes her phone and hands it to the American and says, 'This call is for you'. The American hears the voice of the glamorous assistant saying, 'Your life is in danger, you must get out of this building now'. Thus all your assumptions are blown out of the water and you are taken completely by surprise. That's a great reaction to get. Immediately the reader is gripped, and Brown is such a good suspense writer that he keeps up that level of tension all the way to the end of the book.

We can't all be Dan Brown. But that's the gold standard – that's what we're aiming for.

Even at the outline stage, it's already time to start watching out for boring bits. It's so easy to fall prey to them, because there's a certain amount of information that you have to get over to the reader to help them understand the plot. But if you want to write a popular bestseller, you can't have boring bits.

Let's say you find that you've written five dull pages but there's information in those pages that you absolutely have to get over. You simply have to work your imagination harder. You have to examine that scene and introduce a dramatic question. You have to give the principal character something to worry about or strive after, a problem or goal that you can then develop and resolve at the end. This way you deliver the vital information incidentally, as a byproduct of the drama.

The trick with information is to put it in the right place. For example, in my 1986 novel *Lie Down With Lions*, there's a gun. You can't just have a gun in the story, at least not since *The Day of the Jackal*. You have to say what make it is, whether it's a pistol or a revolver, what size of ammunition it takes. Even if, like me, you think of guns as somewhere between boring and hateful, you still have to write about them.

In *Lie Down With Lions* there's a scene towards the end where the hero and heroine are holding a Russian guy prisoner. The hero hands the gun to the heroine and says: 'If he moves, shoot him'. But she's never handled a gun before. So the guy, who is a CIA agent, has to tell her where the safety catch is, because if she doesn't know she'll pull the trigger and nothing will happen. Thus the reader learns all about the gun in the precise moment that the heroine needs to learn about it as well. Information done right builds suspense and is no longer boring.

The main thing is to be completely intolerant. Do not be tempted to think that some of the other scenes are so great that they will make up for the boring bits. You can't do that, because they won't. You have to be a perfectionist.

The other essential element that can't be boring is your characters. A popular novel can't have dull characters – we're spending too much time with them. If you have boring characters, people will stop reading. So if you think a character is dull, you have to do something about it.

To deepen a character, start asking yourself questions.

Let's say it's a man. What was his mother like and how does he feel about her? Same for his father. Did he have brothers and sisters? What was he like at school? Was he top of the class? Was he always in trouble? Was he the teacher's pet? Who was his first girlfriend and how does he remember that? Does that first romance make him feel happy or embarrassed, or both?

These characters, and the answers to these questions, may not appear in the book, but if you think about them it will enrich both the characters and your writing.

Every important character should have a life outside the plot in order to make them more real. They should have things they do that have nothing to do with building a cathedral or winning World War Two. They should have people they hang out with just because they like them. They should have a job, even if their job is not part of the story. Don't think of them merely as people in the plot. Think of them as people who, when they're not in the story, are doing other things.

The principal characters have to be a certain type of person. They have to be strong and determined. You can't write a good story about people who are timid and cautious, who let life flow by without ever protesting. You need the kind of character who is going to get into trouble, because without trouble there is no story. Of course, there are plenty of prize-winning literary novels about people who suffer, and either can't or won't do anything about it. But we're not talking about that sort of novel. If you want to write a widely popular novel, you have to have characters who do stuff.

When I began writing it was normal for the female characters to be incidental to the story. They had to be rescued or they made things difficult for the hero. Thankfully those days are over, and I played my small part in this change, because in *Eye of the Needle* the hero of the story is female – I think this was a first for an outdoor adventure thriller. People often mention the strong female characters in my books. It seems they take strong male characters for granted.

There should be no incidental baggage in the story. Be economical. You only want characters who are making a difference. Even your victims have to have an active role to play. There will be people who suffer, but unless you want to write torture porn they must be seen to struggle and resist. You have to give the reader something to admire.

In the same way that you enrich character, you should also enrich setting. A prime example is *The Godfather*, by Mario Puzo. At heart it's a routine crime novel, and if that was all there was to it, it would not have been the huge success that it was. But the crime is set in such a rich environment of Italian American culture and that environment described with such affection, that it almost makes you feel as if you'd love to be part of such an enormous family who all look after one another. These are the worst people in America, mass murderers, but we'll never forget the old man, Marlon Brando, saying that a man should spend time with his family, or the young woman thinking of marrying into that loving family who has to confront the reality that her boyfriend thinks murder is a perfectly ordinary way to do business.

So if you have set your story in suburban Oxford, is there a reason you have chosen that location? There's a whole world to explore, so maybe this story could take place in Istanbul or San Francisco or Paris or Milan? Make sure the setting makes the most sense for your story and is somewhere the reader can enjoy exploring with your characters.

If you choose a too-familiar setting you may be too comfortable with it. Writing about somewhere you know less well presents its own problems, but problems are where creativity is triggered. So why not do something ambitious? Move the whole thing to Vienna in 1911. Be bold. That's the way you need to be thinking if you're trying to create a book that will be a big bestseller.

Likewise there is an appeal to the mundane, but beware this appeal. The mundane may appear easy to write about, but this brings with it a higher risk of complacency. It may actually be harder to produce your best work.

Don't be afraid of moral complications. The best moral complications have the reader not knowing what the character should do. The reader thinks, 'Yes, I'd take that shortcut', but also, 'Taking that shortcut would be really unkind', and so instinctively understands that the hero is going to have regrets either way. Making an unkind decision doesn't make someone immoral. The reader will empathise so long as you show the hero as a thinking person in a dilemma.

Sometimes you run across something that stops you. You've got a brilliant plot twist and suddenly you realise it couldn't have happened like that, because you've written something else that conflicts with it or your research rules it out.

> Be on the lookout for any unique selling point, or wow factor, that will make your book stand out from the rest.

For example, in *A Dangerous Fortune* I wanted two people to get divorced and it turned out to be incredibly difficult for anybody to get divorced in the Victorian era. My first reaction was that this would mess up the whole plot, but then I realised it would simply make the plot more complex, which is good because it adds to the drama.

It's often like that. Something that seems like an insurmountable obstacle turns out to be an advantage. But I wouldn't intentionally paint myself into a corner. These days I am better at anticipating what could go wrong and maximising the benefit. A character may have a plan for solving his problems, but if I outwit him and think of five things that could go wrong with his plan, then I have five dramatic scenes.

Over the years I've developed a nose for what works and what doesn't, but in the early days there can often be false starts with an outline. I would sometimes work for a month on a story idea before realising it wasn't going anywhere, and that might happen several times over.

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Be on the lookout for any unique selling point, or wow factor, that will make your book stand out from the rest. Take Thomas Harris, for example: Hannibal Lecter doesn't just kill people; he eats them. That's the wow factor – the shock and the horror. Take Frederick Forsyth: the wow factor of *The Day of the Jackal* is the realism, the way Forsyth told us in detail how to get a false passport (go to the graveyard; find a grave belonging to a person born about the same time as you but who died young; take their name and impersonate them) and how to adjust the sight of a rifle in a forest shooting at a melon in a string bag. Take Dan Brown: the wow factor in *The Da Vinci Code* is the blasphemy, with religious figures and great artists being treated like ordinary people.

The dream is always to write a scene that everybody talks about.

Every day I start by reading what I wrote yesterday, and I always improve it. I always make changes, whether big or small. For me it's really important to keep doing this. Then when I've finished the first draft, I show it to lots of people and rewrite it all over again. Throughout that process, you have to be thinking: what's going to make the story better, and grab the reader's attention even harder?

You have to spend a certain amount of time going back through what you've written and planting details that make sense of or enhance what comes later. If a character has a triumph half way through the novel, you can go back, and let it be known in advance that this triumph is something he's always longed for. Then when it actually happens, it's a bigger deal, with more emotion to it. If there's a battle, make it the turning point of the war. If somebody falls in love, make it the love of his life. Don't rob a bank – rob Fort Knox.

TAKEAWAYS

- **Great stories often start with a question. The same is true for chapters and scenes. A novel is the sum total of a series of questions and answers.**
- **If there are boring bits in your story, you simply have to work your imagination harder. You must find a way of introducing drama into the situation.**

EXERCISES

Return to the selection of books you made earlier – some you enjoyed, some you didn't. Check how the author delivers information. Is it integral to the plot? Does it serve to develop character? Or has it simply been imported into the text as an undigested chunk of prose?

Think of an object that appears in your story that requires technical explanation. Track down a users' manual on this object and copy down that technical information; alternatively, write it for yourself as a passage of instructional prose. Imagine a scene in which this object might first appear, and jot down the essentials of what is going to happen in that scene: beginning, middle and end, and any transitional steps along the way. Now write the scene, making sure that the necessary information about the object is communicated to both characters and reader simultaneously, as part of the dramatic action.

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