

## 16. Plot Twists & Rabbit Holes

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I love plot twists. I'm known for my plot twists. I twist a lot. Perhaps I over-twist. I suggest that for now, you try over-twisting too. That's how you flex your twisting muscles.

One technique is simply to look for twists at every turn. At every single point in your story, ask yourself: what can I add here that will surprise? You're not going to use them all. For every twist I include, there's five or six I let go by. Look out for twists in others' stories too. Train your mind to spot and anticipate them. When you're reading a book or watching a show, especially if it's a mystery, think about other ways it could have gone.

The trick is to ground your extraordinarily outrageous twists in ordinary reality. That's how you get the reader to keep believing.

In *Tell No One*, as you will recall, a man and woman are happily married. They've been together since they were children. They're having this wonderful time at their lake house and the wife ends up being murdered. Eight years pass. The man gets an email to click a hyperlink at a certain time. He clicks on the link. His supposedly dead wife walks into view, looks into the camera, says 'I'm sorry' – and then vanishes again. The following short extract comes as the main character, David Beck, is thinking about what he's just seen.

*'I looked at the blank screen, and the truth struck me anew: I'd just seen Elizabeth.*

*I could try to rationalise it away. But this wasn't a dream. I'd had dreams where Elizabeth was alive. Too many of them. In most, I'd just accept her return from*

*the grave, too thankful to question or doubt. I remember one dream in particular where we were together – I don't remember what we were doing or even where we were – and right then, in mid-laugh, I realised with breath-crushing certainty that I was dreaming, that very soon I'd wake up alone. I remember the dream – me reaching out at that moment and grabbing hold of her, pulling her in close, trying desperately to drag Elizabeth back with me.*

*I knew dreams. What I had seen on the computer wasn't one.*

*It wasn't a ghost either. Not that I believe in them, but when in doubt, you might as well keep an open mind. But ghosts don't age. The Elizabeth on the computer had. Not a lot, but it had been eight years. Ghosts don't cut their hair either. I thought of that long braid hanging down her back in the moonlight. I thought about the fashionably short cut I had just seen. And I thought about those eyes, those eyes that I had looked into since I was seven years old.*

*It was Elizabeth. She was still alive.'*

How is that a plot twist?

By showing Beck's frame of mind, we start to believe that it really is Elizabeth. The dream where you feel someone is still alive and then realise you are dreaming and are about to wake up is awful, and awfully real. You want to reach out and grab that person. That's happened to me with my parents, which is what gives this scene emotional heft. We just saw the twist where Elizabeth appears on screen, but instead of answering the questions that are going through the

reader's head, we're going in deeper, like Beck, and buying into it, like Beck. The twist is being twisted a little further, and the emotional investment is twisting up too.

I'd like to walk you through another couple of plot twists, this time from TV.

We've established that a twist should lead to an increase in emotional engagement. It should also, if possible, still lead in the wrong direction. You've just had the revelation. You think you're heading into the light, but really you're heading straight for more darkness.

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## Ground your extraordinarily outrageous twists in ordinary reality.

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In episode two of *The Stranger* we meet a killer, played by Paul Kaye. We've just seen him brutally kill a woman. We're wondering who this creepy guy is. We've now seen him twice, but don't yet understand his role in the story. As the episode ends, we see him drive up to a place we don't yet know. This is building suspense. You're curious as to where he is going. Then, as the episode comes to an end and the camera spins round, we realise that he's now in the police station, which we've seen before, and that he's greeting a detective sergeant we've already met.

Clearly they are friends. Clearly he is a cop, actually working on the case. But that particular penny dropping only raises more questions. We have the answer to who Kaye is, but the fact that he's on the inside doesn't seem to square with what we've just seen him do, so immediately, we realise it's going to be more complicated than we thought. The twist gives way to another twist. The resolution delivers a new mystery.

That's the key to writing a twist. Don't close down the story. Keep on opening it up. This is plot twisting to create more story. It compels you to watch the next episode.

The second twist I want to discuss comes at the end of episode five. It occurs in a subplot involving the actors Stephen Rea and Richard Armitage. Rea is a sweet old man who is trying to stand up to the evil empire that plans to knock down his block for new housing. He holds fast throughout, even chaining himself to the building, but everything is stacked against him. Armitage has been trying to help.

We've loved this old man. He lost his wife many years ago and lives on his own. Now he has finally lost the case. They're going to tear down his house. Then they're tearing it down. He's lost everything. He closes his eyes.

Then, just when we think it's all over, we see something fall from the building. Everyone moves in closer to look, and suddenly, the scales fall from our eyes. Now we know why Rea didn't want the place knocked down. Now we know why he wanted to go on living there forever. It's not because he's a sweet old man. It's because he was hiding the body of his wife inside the walls.