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WRITING CRIME, MYSTERY, THRILLER, AND SUSPENSE

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TYPES OF CRIME FICTION AND READER EXPECTATIONS

- Crime Fiction
    - A narrative in which a crime is a central feature driving the development of the story. It need not be a mystery, thriller, or suspense tale, but it can be. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, is a good example of crime fiction which isn't really founded on the mechanics of mystery or thriller, although it has elements of both. Crime fiction includes capers, noir, tales of revenge, and tales of adventure. Readers expect an interesting ride with a satisfying conclusion, in which the correct (but not necessarily the morally righteous) person prevails. This is the most general category, and it includes the other categories.
- Mystery
    - A narrative in which a crime solver must discover who committed a crime, or why the crime was committed, or both. Readers want to be challenged, alongside the crime solver. They expect to be shown all the information the crime solver is shown. Mystery readers respect an author who can outfox them, fair and square, by having the crime solver be the first to solve the mystery. Mystery readers expect a story to produce the "I should have seen that coming" feeling. There are several types of mysteries, including traditional, cozy, edgy cozy, locked-room, impossible crime, and puzzle mysteries. Each type has its own conventions and variations on reader expectations.
- Thriller
    - A narrative in which a protagonist must prevent a looming catastrophe. The reader expects to be subjected to the relentless press of a seemingly impossible-to-stop disaster. It must be an event the reader can relate to. Prevention must not happen until the last possible moment—when all hope has been lost—and the means of prevention must be clever, non-obvious, and doable only by a protagonist who is hindered, stymied, and stretched to the limit of her abilities, and her abilities should be just barely greater than those of her opponent(s). Having multiple point-of-view characters seems to be more acceptable in thrillers than in mysteries, which tend to have few, or one.
- Suspense
    - A narrative that follows the villain as he tightens his grip on the good guy, or follows the good guy as he suffers the ever-tightening grip of the villain, and raises the questions: Will the villain get away with his misdeed(s)?, or will the protagonist escape his seemingly inescapable fate? Suspense and thriller use the same basic driver—prevention of a looming catastrophe—but they differ in scale. In a thriller, the looming catastrophe threatens the wider world, whereas, in suspense, it threatens a person, family, or small group. Close scrapes are a staple of this form. All obvious/easy avenues of salvation are sealed off. Readers expect to feel constant, and constantly increasing psychological tension. The Ripley novels and *Strangers on a Train*, by Patricia Highsmith, as well as Joshilyn Jackson's *Never Have I Ever*, are excellent examples of suspense.

Readers expect writers to deliver the expected experience, at the expected intensity, for the expected duration. This is accomplished by controlling the nature, amount, structure, and timing of information communicated to the reader, and the manner in which that information is conveyed. Commercial success can depend on the degree to which readers' expectations are met. The techniques for each form are useful in all forms. *Mastering Suspense, Structure & Plot*, by Jane K. Cleland, and *Plot Perfect*, by Paula Munier are excellent resources on how to structure a book and to 'make it work' properly for readers, agents, and publishers. *Story Genius*, and *Wired for Story*, by Lisa Cron, are excellent resources for fine tuning structure and language to induce strong emotional responses in the reader.

PLOT ESSENTIALS: THE REALLY BIG PICTURE

- Organizing Questions:
    - (1) **What** is my story about? [THEME]
        - This can be rather abstract—some wise idea, or some lesson learned, or the arrival of a change in the way things are done, or some troubling generalized question:
            - e.g. Amy Tan's books are often a study of the old Shakespearean idea: "What's past is prologue."
            - e.g. My first book looks at a change in the way the cocaine business is conducted
            - e.g. "How does a wrongful conviction affect a family?"
            - e.g. John Grisham's *A Time to Kill* looks at how the social, political, and judicial forces in a small Southern attempt to thwart due process for an unpopular defendant
    - (2) **Who** is my story about? [PROTAGONIST and ANTAGONIST]
        - The story must be about someone(s) experiencing the consequences of the idea embodied in the theme. It may be helpful to think in terms of who the story will most greatly or dramatically or interestingly affect.
            - e.g. Amy Tan's books often look at the effects on present-day descendants of long-ago traumas inflicted on their ancestors
            - e.g. *A Time to Kill* is about how a White lawyer defending unpopular Black defendant experiences his community's disapproval of equal justice for all races
            - e.g. *Silence of the Lambs* is about a rookie FBI agent trying to compel a psycho-killer psychiatrist to give her information she needs to stop a serial killer

- (3) What **question** does my story answer? [NARRATIVE QUESTION]
  - This is the theme rendered in terms of what your protagonist must do. Think of it in terms of the protagonist's actions/abilities.
    - e.g. "Can Joe achieve his dream of writing a novel, even though he's alexic?"
    - e.g. "Will Darla be able to hold her family together, even though she's in prison for life?"
    - e.g. "Will Mary's search for the truth about her husband destroy her marriage because of the powerful political interests trying to keep the truth hidden."
    - [NOTE: Each of these questions state the **basic conflict**.]

- (4) What is the story structure? Or, how is the story being told? [SCAFFOLDING]
  - Linear/chronological vs. Non-linear/non-chronological
  - Who's talking? (one character, multiple characters, an omniscient narrator)
    - Only one character's point of view per scene – NO HEAD HOPPING
  - What person is the story told in? (first, second, third, close third)
  - Will you use flashbacks?

- Must your writing make use of these questions? No! However, even if your prose is beautiful, interesting, thoughtful, profound, and personally fulfilling, if these questions do not inform your writing, the chances it will meet reader, agent, and publisher expectations are probably lower.

- Answering these questions may not be easy. Experimentation may be required. Your initial formulations may be wrong. Wrong is not failure—it's progress. False starts and course corrections are common for writers at every level. You may discover that the story you set out to write is not the story that reveals itself to you. Starting, stopping, rooting around in the idea bin, working and reworking, and changing things around is never wasted time. It is the necessary excavation work that exposes the story you eventually write.

PLOT ESSENTIALS: THE FAIRLY BIG PICTURE

- THE CONFLICT
  - What does the protagonist need, and who must she fight to get it?
    - This is **the engine that drives the story**. The writer needs to understand the opposing forces very clearly and structure the story to exploit this conflict.

- THE INCITING EVENT
  - This the initial disturbance that disrupts the protagonist's ordinary life, and forces the protagonist on the path of resolving the conflict. It is the promise of what is to come. In genre fiction, it tends to happen early, sometimes even in the first sentence. In literary fiction, it can come later. Think of it as **the moment of ignition**.

- Examples:
  - The protagonists see a woman throw a baby down a well. *The Well and the Mine*, by Gin Phillips
  - The protagonist sees a woman walking down the side of the Interstate, carrying her possessions in a plastic bag, holding hands with a young girl. *Desperation Road*, by Michael Farris Smith

- THE MAIN PLOT POINT
  - This occurs when, because of the inciting event, the protagonist is forced to cross a no-turning-back threshold. Circumstances must get a grip on the character (and, by identification, the reader) so s/he can't back out.
  - The Inciting Event must be coupled to its Main Plot Point:
    - Example:
      - Inciting Event: A father discovers his son is not in his room. He sees the window open. He gets angry, assuming the boy snuck out again, BUT THEN . . .
      - Main Plot Point: The ransom demand is delivered
  - It should occur roughly at **the one-quarter point**, but in novel writing this is a bit flexible. In TV or movies where there's an objective (an in TV, predetermined) run-time for the show, particular events must happen at a specified clock-time. In novels, the run-time is the reader's reading speed, and start to finish consumption is rarely the norm, so placement of the MPP can be less precise. HOWEVER, in the very interesting book, *The Bestseller Code*, a team of computational linguists have discovered evidence that having **particular events occurring by a particular page-time** in the story can enhance the likelihood of the book's success.

PLOT MECHANICS FOR CRIME, MYSTERY, THRILLER, AND SUSPENSE

- PLOT
  - The sequence of events described in narrative form. A good *idea* for a book/short story is not the same as a good *plot* for a book/short story.

- MYSTERY PLOT FEATURES
  - An unanswered question the reader cares about:
    - Who did it? (killed the victim, stole the money, kidnapped the countess)
    - Why did they do it?
  - A solver who readers care about (high-agency, imperfect, relentless)
  - Information that, at first, leads the protagonist in the wrong direction
  - A credible, non-obvious answer to the question that can be arrived at only by having the solver endure the events/obstacles described in the story

- THRILLER PLOT FEATURES
    - A looming catastrophe that will affect/destroy something the protagonist and readers care about
    - A protagonist/preventer of the catastrophe whom readers care about
    - A race against the clock
    - A credible, non-obvious prevention of the catastrophe that requires the preventer to overcome obstacles and seemingly impossible odds.
        - But what about Frodo's journey, in *The Lord of the Rings*?

- SUSPENSE PLOT FEATURES
    - A source of anxiety (looming catastrophe) affecting a protagonist readers care about
    - A clever, credible means by which the protagonist eliminates the source of anxiety
    - Obstacles to eliminating the source of anxiety
    - A looming deadline by which resolution must occur (the ticking clock)
        - For a fascinating variation on this theme, see the *Ripley* novels, by Patricia Highsmith, in which the reader is made to feel sympathetic toward the villain/anxiety producer by making the forces against which the villain fights seem even worse than he is.

- SUSPENSE VS. THRILLER
    - Both involve a looming catastrophe that threatens the protagonist, but the scope of the threat is different:
        - In **suspense**, the threat is focused on **the protagonist and her personal world**
            - e.g. Blackmail; stalker; kidnapping
        - In **thriller**, the threat is focused on **the wider world**
            - e.g. A planet-killer asteroid; recovery of the One Ring by Sauron
    - These are not airtight distinctions. It often comes down to emphasis and even to where publishers/booksellers believe it will best be shelved in the store.

- CHARACTER BASICS
    - Readers want to identify with the protagonist, so they can experience the story events the same way the protagonist does. Cultivating identification early is important, because readers tend to discard books if they can't figure out, fairly quickly, if the protagonist is someone they want to go along for the ride with. Different degrees of identification are likely with different kinds of protagonists:
        - Likable characters are easiest
        - Sympathetic characters are next easiest
        - Relatable/understandable, but unlikeable characters are the toughest and they seem to go in and out of fashion.

- SUSPENSE SHORT STORY DECONSTRUCTED: *Birdbrains*
    - The Protagonist(s): The Members of the Endangered Household (Terri, Miss Kitty, and Marshal Dillon)
    - Sources of Anxiety/The Looming Catastrophe:
        - Terri's condominium is about to be repossessed because she failed to pay her home loan
        - Terri recently lost her job, which was her only source of income.
    - Eliminating the Anxiety/Catastrophe:
        - Raise enough money, quickly enough, to cure the loan default, by selling her possessions, including Miss Kitty and Marshal Dillon, the two African Grey parrots she inherited from her mother
    - Obstacle to Eliminating the Anxiety/Catastrophe
        - Sales of her possessions aren't going well/fast enough
    - Eliminating the Anxiety/Catastrophe
        - Getting Alfred, her soon-to-be ex-boyfriend, to repay the loan she made to him to fund his startup which failed.
    - Obstacle to Eliminating the Anxiety/Catastrophe
        - Alfred refuses to repay the money Terri loaned him
    - Eliminating the Anxiety/Catastrophe
        - Obtain the proceeds from Alfred's life insurance policy
    - Obstacles to Eliminating the Anxiety/Catastrophe
        - Alfred is alive, healthy, and in no apparent danger of accidental death
        - Terri is unwilling to murder Alfred
    - The Ticking Clock
        - Terri has received the Final Notice that foreclosure on the condo is imminent
        - Alfred's declaration that he will exclude Terri as the beneficiary on his life insurance policy, the next day
    - Resolution
        - Miss Kitty and Marshal Dillon bring about Alfred's death before he can change the beneficiary
    - Making the Resolution Credible
        - Show the **method** the birds will use to solve the problem
            - Demonstrate how the sonic safe-to-cross signal works
            - Miss Kitty spoofs Albert's phone, showing the birds:
                - Are remarkable mimics
                - Can/will use sound to 'mess with' Albert
                - Understand what's going on
        - Show the birds are **capable** of using the method
            - Marshal Dillon belted out "five golden rings" loud enough for pedestrians on the street out front to hear
            - Miss Kitty spoofed Albert's phone, demonstrating she
                - Dislikes Albert, and knows how to manipulate him

        - Show the birds will have an **opportunity** to use the method
            - The early demonstration the low situational awareness that will leave Albert vulnerable:
                - Stares intently at his phone, even while walking
                - Bumps into a blind person at the crosswalk
                - His meandering gait coming up the condo stairs
            - The early demonstration that Albert responds to sonic cues
                - In the beginning of the story, Albert is heedless of his surroundings at the crosswalk, but he leads the pack once the safe-to-cross signal begins beeping
        - Show the birds have an **motive** to use the method
            - Albert is mean to Terri in the presence of the birds
            - Albert is mean to the birds, in the presence of Terri
            - The birds cower from Albert and his ugly actions
            - Terri's voiced anxiety over losing their home and the possibility she'll get the insurance money if Albert dies before changing his beneficiary
    - Making the Resolution Non-obvious
        - The method and capabilities of the birds, and the events that give them a motive, are presented so the reader will see them as elements that either endear the birds to Terri, and make their possible sale heartbreaking, or make Alfred despicable and worthy of some terrible fate.

PLOT MECHANICS: IMPORTANT TOOLS FOR CREATING THE SENSE OF MYSTERY

- A STRONG BEGINNING

    - Strive for a **strong beginning**: The first sentence/paragraph/page should put readers into the story world as efficiently and completely as possible, with the promise that the story world is so compelling they won't want to exit it because they'll become captive to their desire to find out what happens next.

- OBSCURING A CHARACTER'S MOTIVE

    - Give the character a job/profession/affiliation that will give them the appearance of having one stance, when they really have another
        - Moles = Outsiders pretending to be insiders
            - Common in espionage and political thrillers
            - Useful in stories where:
                - A character's allegiance to a larger cause is compromised by leverage over their personal life. Even though the character may not have *formally* switched sides, s/he has *functionally* switched sides

        - A character intentionally misrepresents their allegiance to one cause, so they can serve a different cause (double agents, traitors)
    - Shills = Insiders pretending to be outsiders
        - Common in con game thrillers and mysteries
        - Facilitates the double-cross
- Early in the story, conceal the part of the antagonist's history that implicates a motive, plant context that will allow readers to assume the character's sympathies lie in one direction, have the protagonist experience a revelatory moment that changes their understanding of the antagonist. HOWEVER:
    - This must be done **carefully**, with **indicators along the way** showing the character behaving in ways subtly inconsistent with their *apparent* sympathies, but consistent with their later-revealed *actual* (secret) history, so readers will realize they should have 'seen that coming'.
    - This can be used to great effect in revenge tales and espionage, where unreliable characters are expected/necessary.
- In general, the allies of/sympathizers with the criminal are enemies of the crime solver, and vice-versa, but it's possible for an individual to be an ally and an enemy of the criminal and the crime solver. It requires the use of deceit and secret, conflicting motives. It's a powerful technique that elicits strong reader reaction.
    - Dirty cop stories exploit this technique, especially where the dirty cop is trying to walk a fine line, and confine the effects of her bad actions to other bad guys, but something causes the effects to spill over onto the good guys.

- HIDING CLUES IN PLAIN SIGHT

    - Show the **clue now**, but give the meaning-conferring **context later**
        - *The Late Show*, by Michael Connelly
            - The Clue: A burn mark on a dead man's chest
            - The Context: The location of the mark implicates what caused it, which implicates the dead man's mission, which implicates the reason he was killed

    - For linchpin clues, **mention the clue in passing**, without calling unnecessary attention to it, then **provide the context, drop by drop**, over the course of the story
        - *Dark River Rising*
            - The Clue: A kilo of cocaine in a plastic bag with a tubule attached is noted in the initial crime scene investigation
            - The Context Revealed/Discovered Along the Way: The bag is revealed to be an osmosis bag used in laboratory procedures, the lab procedure can include chemical purification, the cocaine in the bag shows none of the isotopic/purification contaminants found in all street cocaine, the bags can also be used in synthesis procedures

- SCATTERING THE FACTS/CLUES TO CHALLENGE THE READER

    - To keep the reader from seeing a straight-line path to the solution, the clues that add up to the solution need to be scattered across the narrative. Discovery of one clue can/but need not directly lead to discovery of the next clue.
        - One-Clue-Leads-To-The-Next
            - Common in cozy mysteries and deductive-puzzle mysteries, where the (usually) amateur sleuth finds the key that leads to the post office box that contains the envelope that contains the map that leads to the jewels that were stolen by . . . Sherlock Holmes is an exception to the amateur sleuth convention for this structure.
            - The less professional the sleuth (i.e. not a police detective, private investigator, FBI agent, etc.) the better this appreciated, because amateur sleuths are generally expected by readers to have professional crime-solving skills or access to professional-level tools and information sources. Writers such as James Lee Burke, John Hart, Michael, Greg Iles, and Daniel Woodrell, tend to immerse readers in every aspect of the protagonist's internal and external worlds and have the solution to the mystery emerge from protagonist's journey through the challenges presented by these worlds.
        - Clues Discovered Independently Through The Crime Solver's Investigatory Skills/Life
            - Works well in stories where the protagonist is a professional crime solver (i.e. a police detective, private investigator, FBI agent, etc.)
            - Pros are expected to be able to apply professional techniques to distinct situations as they are encountered

    - However, **scattering and de-emphasizing** critical facts is **necessary but not sufficient** to a well-written mystery. Chances are, if the facts needed for the solution add up, in the mind of the author, then they will also add up in the mind of the reader, even if they've been scattered, and subjected to misdirection (the addition of red herrings) and de-emphasis (slipping it in casually or next to something with greater eye/emotional appeal). To keep this from happening:
        - (1) Present clues that are **consistent** with the solution, **but not compulsive** of the solution, then
        - (2) Have the protagonist undergo a **change of perspective** that allows her see how the clues are consistent with a certain solution, and brings her to believe the clues are compulsive of that solution then
        - (3) Have the protagonist **test** her new understanding in a way that **validates** her thinking—but not until the last possible moment.

- SUBPLOTS, SETTING, SECONDARY CHARACTERS AND BACKSTORY

    - **The Basics:** A powerful technique in mystery writing is the use of a **perspective change** in the protagonist **to give the protagonist an advantage** over the other characters and the reader, by changing the way the protagonist sees the same facts the reader and other characters see, so she is able to:
        - Understand the facts differently than the reader/other characters do,
        - Attribute a new significance to the facts that produces the critical epiphany—the moment when the who or the why becomes clear.
        - NOTE: There is an inviolable rule in mystery writing: *Thou shalt not give the crime solver private facts*. The reader must be privy to the same information the crime solver is privy to. Anything else is cheating, and is a guaranteed way to lose the respect of the reader. However, it is perfectly permissible to change the protagonist/crime-solver's perspective, so she sees things in a new light. This works best when the change is motivated by exposure to information or experience that exploits some special aspect of the **protagonist's background** (e.g. a skill, profession, experience) so that it doesn't spark the same epiphany in the reader—at least not right away.
        - The elements that produce the change in perspective should constitute a build a bridge from where your protagonist is to where she needs to be

    - **Subplots** should be organic to the story. They should serve the story in ways other than just character development or setting.
        - Think More In Terms Of: This subplot serves the main plot by _____, and incidentally reveals _____ about the character/setting.
        - Think Less In Terms Of: This subplot reveals _____about the character/setting, and incidentally serves the main plot by _____.

        - **EXAMPLE** from *Dark River Rising*
            - The subplot: My protagonist, Wallace Hartman, is Roman Catholic. She is also the daughter/sister/widow of a father/brother/husband killed by a drunk driver. Her surviving brother is a Catholic priest. All three siblings were very close, so the death of the oldest left a gap in their world that sometimes makes being together a painful reminder of the loss. Wallace's surviving brother invites her to have a meal with him and a fellow priest who happens to have been a polymer chemist before he became a priest.
        - The **main plot enhancement** produced by this subplot:
            - Two critical insights that **changed Wallace's perspective** were developed during the main scene of this subplot, so she could understand what earlier clues meant, but the reader (probably/hopefully) would not:

        - In the course of a theological debate between Wallace and the priests, the idea that someone would soon discover how to achieve a *long-sought, but theretofore impossible*, goal:
            - The creation of artificial lifeforms.
        - In the course of a discussion between Wallace and the priest's former career, the idea that *things occurring in nature can be synthesized in a laboratory*:
            - The synthesis of complex chemicals from scratch, instead of extracting them from natural sources.
        - Tagging the theological discussion about doing something that had never been done, something Wallace understood because she came from a religious household, onto the subject of chemical synthesis, something she didn't understand, because she wasn't a chemist, allowed me to build a bridge from what she understood to what she needed to understand, in essence, allowing her to see the information she had accumulated from the perspective of a chemist
- How the **setting** is used in/enhanced by the above subplot:
    - Wallace's playful, irreverent approach to religion (the scene in the confessional) tells you that she hasn't lost her sense of humor or become completely cynical
    - The book is set in Baton Rouge,LA, a traditionally Catholic-heavy part of the country, so it adds authenticity to the environment
    - The circumstances of the death of her father, brother, and husband provide an avenue for me giving her a burdens of guilt, which turns out to be what drove her to become cop, and gives her a 'personal' stake in fighting crime, in general (and substance abuse related crime, in particular).
    - It allows her to reveal, to a prospective love interest, the damage her guilt is causing her, showing that while she's emotionally vulnerable, she can still trust others (the romantic encounter on the levee).

- The role of **secondary characters:** Keep them necessary
    - Facilitating plot development
        - In the above subplot example, Wallace's brother and the visiting priest are necessary participants in a sequence of scenes that result in the all-important perspective change that Wallace must undergo
    - An investment in the future, if you're a series writer
        - Main characters in crime fiction series will need a cast of characters to interact with from book to book. Characters they'll get along with, have fights with, have sex with, become enemies with, become friends again with, get information from, and so forth. The histories of these characters are revealed over the course of the series, and the utility of these characters varies from one book to the next.

- **Backstory** Do's and Don'ts

  - The need to use backstory to set things up implicates the question: How much **backstory** is enough? Only as much as the **present story** demands. And this depends, to some extent, on how the backstory is communicated:
    - Flashbacks: There is an editorial (and, to some extent, a reader) bias against the use of flashbacks, under the theory they interrupt the flow of the story-present. Use them sparingly, keep them short, and they must **communicate information necessary to the arc of the story or the capabilities of the character who is the subject of the flashback**.
    - Story-Present Events: Communicating backstory through dialogue and discoveries in the story-present are powerful because:
      - They don't disrupt the flow of the story
      - They provide opportunities to see story-present characters interacting and bonding or becoming enemies
    - Exploiting The Protagonist's History: To do this fairly, and in a meaningful way, the writer must communicate the history in a way that feels natural. In the course of ordinary events, where it also serves the present, is better than in-the-nick-of-time:
      - Example of **How Not To Do It**: You're ten pages from the end of the book and Jenny is creeping down the dark hallway, trying to escape certain death, when she discovers:
        - "The door was locked and she no longer had the key."
        - Then, with no hint about this, anywhere in the first two hundred fifty pages: "Luckily, her mom, who'd been a first class burglar back in the day, had taught Jenny how to pick any lock ever made, using nothing more than a hairpin and toothpick. Sliding a hairpin free of her long blond tresses…"
  - Using **backstory at the beginning**
    - This can be tricky, but it's okay if it's done correctly
      - It should be a case that, in order for the story to work, it **must** begin where you've begun
      - Backstory, especially early backstory, must serve the story but not become the story

- Common backstory-at-the-beginning techniques:
  - The prologue
    - An event in the story-past that the story-present will revolve around. Use a prologue when the time between the prologue events and the start of the story-present (i.e. Chapter 1) is quite long, but the events occurring during the in-between time are largely irrelevant to the story. If the time between the prologue events and the chapter 1 events is short, then the prologue is probably the true chapter 1. Prologues go in and out of fashion. At the moment, editorial resistance to prologues seems low. There is, however, a general editorial bias against the use of flash-backs, because they tend to interrupt the flow of the story, and a prologue is, essentially, just a flashback that occurs before the story even begins. So, because there's no story, yet, to interrupt, they are a bit easier for editors to accept.
  - Interweaving short stretches of past and present
    - This can be quite powerful, if it is used to intimately tie a character's experience of present circumstance to past events
    - The opening pages of *The Black Hour*, by Lori Rader-Day contain an excellent example of this:
      - The principal character struggles, physically and emotionally, to get from her car, across a parking lot, along a sidewalk, into a building, up a flight of stairs, then down a long dark hall to her office. The nature of her physical problem is slowly revealed, and but the reader is left to wonder at the reason for her emotional difficulty. As she makes the external journey from her car to her office, the environmental cues/obstacles she encounters along the way trigger an internal journey from the present into the past, increasing her emotional pain. The farther she progresses into the building, the further she sees into her memories, until, when she reaches the door of her office, the past meets the present in an unexpected/chilling way.

- SHOW, DON'T TELL
  - Physical Details (Small-Scale SDT)
    - If you want the reader to know it's a gloomy day, instead of summarizing: "It was a gloomy day",
    - Describe the physical details and their effect on the character: "Ever since Ellen's rain-soaked funeral, just waking up to a drizzly day made Jack want to crawl back into the bottle."
  - A General State of Affairs (Large-Scale SDT)
    - If you want the reader to know the story takes place in a small town with a closed society, don't summarize: "Monty lived in the kind of small town where you didn't stand a chance, unless you were born into the right family."
    - Show this by putting Monty in situations where he experiences the effects of the townspeople's attitudes, so the reader will experience those attitudes along with the character: "Depending on how much you feel comfortable spending, these over here, might have some appeal," the jeweler said, leading Monty toward the section of the display case where the rings looked like cereal box prizes. The man's smile was steady, but it never reached his eyes. He leaned forward over the counter, his hands clasped behind his back. His eyes never left Monty's hands, so Monty pulled them back from the surface of the glass-topped counter, leaving faint streaks of grime. The jeweler's nostrils flared and his mouth pulled to one side as he wiped away the marks with a chamois. "May I look at that one," Monty asked, pointing down through the glass, as the tinkle of the bell over the front door signaled a new customer. "Excuse me, a minute," the man said, smile lines crinkling around his eyes as he looked toward the newcomer. Monty watched as the jeweler reached over the counter and took the newcomer's hand in both of his. They both shot a quick, indifferent glance in Monty's direction, then returned his attention to each other. Three minutes later, they were still carrying on their quiet but animated conversation, when Monty, his face burning, left the store. "Come again," the jeweler called after him, in a chirpy voice, as the bell dinged and the door closed behind him.
      - By showing Monty having periodic experiences of this sort, the reader will understand the nature of Monty's environment, his place in it, and it can justify his later reactions to it. It works, because it **shows** what goes on in this town, and it **conveys the character's subjective reaction** to these objective events.
      - HOWEVER, this aspect of Monty's environment should be important to the main storyline.

- The best tool box for this is your own self-awareness. Monitor your everyday experiences and notice the specific emotions they produce and try to understand why they have this hold on you.
- Examples:
  - Thwarted expectations make you feel _____
  - Unexpected disruptions make you feel _____
  - Exercising power over someone makes you feel _____
  - Passive-aggressive behavior makes you feel _____

KEEPING TRACK OF THE ACTION

PAGE	TIME	ACTION
DAY 1 [SUNDAY]		
001-003	545-559pm	WH **discovers** cocaine-filled backpack at RO homicide crime scene
004-009	600-610pm	WH **interrogates** SS, the BR city engineer who discovered crime scene
009-011	700pm	DB **flees** crime scene hiding place with some of cocaine from backpack
Offscreen	800-805pm	DB **searches** MG's house, sets off burn triggers
012-015	815-825pm	MB **flees** lab and Bayou Sara as house burns
DAY 2 [MONDAY]		
016-022	730-800am	WH **interrogates** SS's wife, learns SS motive for RO homicide [SS = Suspect 01]
022-026	Afternoon	MC **crossmatches** WH and DEA interest in RO, describes significance thereof
DAY 3 [TUESDAY]		
027-031	Morning	JB **forces** WH to partner with MH (fellow officer returning from drug suspension)
031-033	Afternoon	WH **fights** with MH over direction/control of RO investigation
033-038	530-540pm	MC **partners** DEA with reluctant/wary WH on RO homicide [FE = Suspect 02]

Use the aspect of the scene that involves the most intense action/emotion.

Note how "hot" the verb is in each action description, and use the verb sequence to monitor the pace/intensity of the story. Make sure it's a generally rising sine wave. Hot verbs = peaks, cool verbs = valleys, as the protagonist's stakes rise, the pace/intensity rises, as the impediments become stronger, the intensity rises, as time becomes scarcer, pace/intensity rises. For information on the most compelling pace/intensity trajectories, see *The Bestseller Code: Anatomy of the Blockbuster Novel*, by Jodie Archer & Matthew L. Jockers (St. Martin's Press).

- PACE AND INTENSITY

    - Pace: The rate at which events occur in the narrative. Leisurely, action-packed, somewhere in between.
    - Intensity : The degree of heightened emotion the narrative induces in the reader.
        - The more that's on the line/at risk the greater the intensity.
        - The stronger the impediments to escaping the present danger, or achieving the overall goal, the greater the intensity
    - Use Time Dilation/Contraction to Increase Tension
        - Make slow things happen fast and fast things happen slow
            - Fast Things Slow: He's trying to get into the house, to evade the zombie: Describe in slow, careful detail when he drops the keys and has to root around in the muddy leaves by the steps, then he drops them again as the mud makes his hands slippery, then he can't make the key slide into the lock, not on the first try, not the second try, and the zombie's footfalls scraping against the concrete are getting louder, and the key finally goes in, but . . .

Pace and intensity can, and sometimes should be managed simultaneously. An example of this is to put something important in danger, make it appear less and less likely that it will survive the danger, then make the reader aware that the time available to save the thing is running short. Use pace and intensity wisely, so the reader doesn't experience pace fatigue.

- DRAMATIC QUESTIONS: THE UNIVERSAL HOOK
    - First Sentence: Pose a dramatic question that compels the reader to read the next sentence.
    - Final Sentence: Pose a dramatic question that leads to the need to read the first sentence of the next paragraph
    - This technique is **used on a sentence-by-sentence, paragraph-by-paragraph, page-by-page, and chapter-by-chapter basis** to keep the reader engaged.
    - The dramatic question is **a one sentence mystery**. It grabs your readers' attention and then keeps them moving down the page, and on to the next page. It can be phrased as an interrogatory sentence (i.e. an explicit question), but it is often more effective when phrased as a declaratory sentence (i.e. an implicit question). Because most people are pushovers for the unanswered question, if there is a universal source code for the effective hook, the question raised but left unanswered might be it. The space between the unanswered and the answer is where the sensation of wanting can be transformed into craving.
        - "It seemed like a good idea at the time." (implied question)
            - What seemed like a good idea?
        - "Some things are better left unsaid.) (implied question)
            - Like what? And why? And what happens if they are said? Is the character about to say something that he shouldn't?

- "It was a gloriously beautiful day." = BORING, but "Jack knew from experience that, as soon as the weather turned sunny, people would become hopeful, and he could use that." = INTERESTING (How can Jack use people's hope? What kind of person 'uses' another person's hope? For good or bad?)

- Crafting a Hook
  - Early in the Story
    - The reader's story knowledge and character affinity will be low, so dramatic questions posed in the early pages must be able to function free of context
    - Unexplained action or dialog will easily work, at this stage
    - Examples:
      - The story that opens with someone on the run. Even before anything is known about the running person, most readers will want to know why is she fleeing, whether she will get away, and who or what is chasing her.
      - A character shouts "Stop." If this is the entire first line of the book, readers will want answers to the dramatic questions it raises. Who is speaking? To whom? Why is the speaker commanding someone to stop? To stop doing what? A single word, with no context, raises at least four dramatic questions, and the reader keeps reading.
      - Seeming contradictions can also generate potent dramatic questions, in the early going:
        - A character taking an action that seems to be against her self-interest, such as an unarmed woman choosing to stand her ground rather than flee from an armed home invader. Why would she do this?
          - What if this scene was a flashback prologue and the question of why she stood her ground, unarmed is left unresolved, but it later unfolds that the woman had two children in the house with her. She heard the intruder breaking in, and after telling her children to flee out the back door she presented herself as a target. Owning no weapon, she essentially sacrificed herself so her kids would have a little extra time to make their escape. And, then, the main story follows one of those kids, later in life.

- Something as abstract as the opening lines of Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness . . ." raises lots of questions that readers will want answered.

- Later Hooks
  - The reader's story knowledge is high and the writer can make use of this by having a character do something against out of character, raising the dramatic question: "Why did the character do *that*, instead of the thing I expected them to do?"

KEEPING THE MYSTERY A MYSTERY (UNTIL THE END)

1. MISDIRECTION (i.e. the red herring) is one of the hallmarks of the well-written mystery.
   - It can make something seem important, even though, in the end, it will turn out not to be.
     - The crime solver believes a
   - It can be used to make a given character look like the person who committed the crime, even though, in the end, she will turn out not to be.
     - Planted evidence to frame the 'wrong person'
     - Fabricated testimony that implicates
     - An alibi witness who recants
     - A history of having commited such crimes

2. MANAGING THE SUSPECTS
   - A well-constructed mystery, that keeps the reader engaged from beginning to end, will introduce **a number of suspects**.

   - The Challenges of Multiple Suspects
     - The Problem: The earlier a character is implicated, the longer the writer will have to deal with that character, and as more suspects are introduced over the course of the book, the reader will be required to keep track of them and the relevant facts, for long periods of time.
     - A Solution: Periodically remind reader of facts necessary for them to keep the story/characters straight.
     - Eventually, you will have to close in on 'the one' by:
     - Eliminating the suspects one by one, along the way, until only one is left.
     - Keeping them all in the air, until the end when 'the one' is identified. Combining those methods, and showing that the crime/catastrophe was the work of some combination of implicated characters.
     - Giving the crime-solver two related objectives.

        - Missing person stories are often structured this way. **Who** committed the crime **and where** is the missing person?
            - Solution, or partial solution, of one question while keeping the other question unsolved, keeps the mystery alive.
    - Re-Implicating A Formerly Cleared Suspect
        - Have the crime solver encounter information that re-implicates a suspect that was earlier cleared. This is a big intensity/tension builder:
            - If the earlier-cleared suspect then becomes someone who the crime solver ceases to view as a threat, or comes to actively trust, or sees as an ally, then a deadly development using the same MO as the initial crime occurs, but the earlier-cleared suspect is now unaccounted for, or has no alibi, or . . .

BASIC CHECKLIST

- Who is the killer/criminal/antagonist?
- Why did s/he kill the victim/commit the crime/create the problem?
    - On purpose?
        - To what end?
    - By accident?
- What connects the killer to the victim?
- How does the crime solver discover the connections?
    - What is the trail of information?
    - What induces the 'change of perspective'?
    - Who are her allies?
    - Who are her enemies?
- How does the killer attempt to evade discovery/capture?
    - Fleeing?
    - Covering tracks?
    - Diverting/thwarting the crime-solver's efforts?
    - Attacking the crime-solver?
    - Using allies?
        - Who are the killer's allies?
    - What are their motives for helping?
- Why does the killer attempt to evade discovery/capture?
    - To avoid punishment?
    - To avoid social accountability?
    - To protect someone else?
    - To remain free?

SOME MYSTERY-WRITING DOS AND DON'TS

1. *Thou shalt not give the crime solver private facts*.

2. *Thou shalt not use a deus ex machina.*

3. *Too much coincidence is too much.*

4. *Subplots should serve the main plot.*

5. *Don't use the omniscient narrator to warn of dangers ahead. (E.g.* As the last line of the chapter: "Little did Buffy know, in two days' time, all hell was going to break loose.")

6. *Always cliff-hang the end of a chapter or scene —ALWAYS,* ***ALWAYS!!!!!!!***

7. *Thou shalt not head hop, within the confines of a scene.*

8. *Your protagonist must be high-agency—the MOST high-agency character in the story.*

9. *Use a convincing/powerful inciting event to disrupt your protagonist's ordinary situation, and force her onto the dangerous path.*

10. *Adverbs and complex verb tenses are not your friends.*

11. *Read the kind of stories you want to write. Read the kind of stories you want to write. Read the kind of stories you want to write. Read the kind of stories you want to write.*

12. *Inspiration often comes from the act of seeing what you've already put on the page.*

THE INSTRUCTOR

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