

‘Identifying and Fixing Structure and Plot Issues Workshop’

With Laurie Steed on Saturday 11th December 2021

Cohesion, convergence and purpose are key principles of plot structure. Plot takes readers on a journey through moments that develop on a spectrum from “Oh,” to “Oh no!” to “Aha” and finally “Oh Yeh!”. Similarly, a simple plot structure can be identified as the three stages of promise, progress and payoff. Techniques can be married to these three stages on the plot journey. Foreshadowing helps to signal the promise. Revelation provides the “Aha” moments. Pulling plot and subplot together in a culmination delivers on the payoff.

Plotting Page by Page and Subverting Readers’ Expectations:

The thread of the story’s plot must run through every page and every chapter and tension built progressively. Shifts must be orchestrated in the narrative direction and a key component of achieving the sense of intrigue and then payoff in the reader is to subvert the reader’s expectation. Writers may subvert the expectations of their readers by asking themselves, “What if I don’t do what is meant to happen?”

Character Driven Plot:

Generate plot from the character space rather than from the events of the story. Reflect on the relevance of the challenges, for example if tests or fears are married into an established aspect of your character e.g. their fear of spiders testing their specific fears will have more impact. Increase and dial up the agony of the fears. Ground the plot in the stakes for the main protagonist. Readers want the protagonist to have agency. He may not “win out” e.g. the system may win despite their agency, but in the process their character has grown and displayed character traits readers wanted to know more about e.g. their heroism, their intelligence, their tenacity. Consider the “iceberg” and that the trials and challenges endured by the main character let us see what is in them, what they have kept hidden up until now. Think of the “big lie” the main character tells themselves, their false, core beliefs that limit them. The stakes of the antagonist must also be linked in with the plot-line. Look for points of difference in creating characters, create complexity. What is the role of each person who shows up in the story?

Raising the Stakes:

The stakes are raised by key plot points impacting on main characters being constructed as scenes rather than summary. Build a sense of the stakes being high. A mistake in writing is allocating high stakes to a minor character or not communicating the weight of the stakes to the reader. The main character must always have the highest stakes / the most to lose. Don’t ever tell the reader that it matters – that the stakes are high – show the reader with sensory immersion.

Stakes and Narrative Tension:

1. Proximity affects stakes (geographical and temporal – the closer something is either physically or in time, the more it impacts plot)
2. Relevance affects stakes – how relevant is the issue? If a third of the book is all about a minor character, it won't be driving the plot forward
3. Stakes are character-specific – each character has something that they want to avoid or obtain.
4. Stakes build up on the initial dilemma
5. Protagonist wants and fears = stakes
6. Tension is the sweet spot between battling wants and fears
7. Conflict = internal and external obstructions
8. Why this character? Why now? Why should I care?

Plot Evaluation – things to think about:

1. Seek “flow” of events and building of tension
2. Seek oppositional forces (internal/external)
3. Seek openness to evolution
4. More trajectory adjustment than upheaval
5. Every step (even mis-steps) gets you closer to completion
6. Go “out” to discuss and “in” to resolve
7. Walk/reflect on the plot on a non-pressured space
8. Take advice with caution – if someone thinks there is something wrong with your book, they're usually right. If they know what might fix it, they're usually wrong. As writers we need to build this through getting to understand intuitively when we need.
9. Ask the difficult questions – nothing is immovable.

Be able to answer these questions:

1. Who is your protagonist(s)?
2. Where do they start?
3. What's the catalyst?
4. What do they want?
5. What are their fears?
6. What's in their way?
7. How do they overcome the obstacles?
8. How do things end?
9. Observation of whole narrative trajectory (one sentence – they started as this, and became this A to B)
10. Type of book you're describing – genre, how they arc echoes and what it says – redemptive, heartbreaking etc.

