

Musings

Malady

It's a disease; you only have to look at the symptoms to see that: reoccurring fevers, restless nights; that glassy look to the eye! I sincerely hope its not a communicable one, I wouldn't want to spread THIS malady to a brown dog! I peck in my first sentence and sit back and stare at the screen; too "florid" - it needs paring down! The refurbished sentence is SUPER sparce - any "oomph" it had before has been and gone! Tenses have become confused too, so I go into the reconstruction business. The job's complete in record time, but now the sentence doesn't say what I MEANT it to say! All that chopping and changing has wrecked the "flow" of it too; I get busy again. I'm wondering,... is that word I've used to describe my villian a teeny bit STRONG? Several substitutes later I'm reminding myself I can change it any time and I trying to move on. About a dozen words into the second sentence my fingers are idle again and I'm a zombie in front of the screen ...that first sentence is SO crummy I need to change it, right now! Goodness, I've been sitting at this computer for three hours...can't imagine what happened to that time? What I need now is a strong "cuppa" and a nice lie down - I'm a sick woman, you know!

(From Judith R)

Thanks for organising access to awmonline, it is a fabulous resource. How are things back home? I think about you all often. Please make sure you say a huge hi to the group from me. Lyon is a fertile ground for writing. Yesterday I submitted my big feature for the ABC's national magazine, Life etc, so it will be in June or August edition. I have had a few pitches accepted since arriving and the big news is I may be writing for SBS food. Oh my goodness, can you believe it? My tummy does a little dance inside whenever I think about it. I have a list of stories to pitch but want to keep the balance and not make this a year of stress and deadlines. Have a great day and keep your eye on the blog to see what we are up to.

(An extract from an email from Karen - a spellbinding musing don't you agree?)

A WORD to the wise

Do you know about the editing tool MS Word has built in for your convenience? It's easy to use if you want to edit someone's manuscript and have them make the changes or let you know if it's OK for you to make them. And of course, everything is emailable. (Have a Word document in front of you when you read this.)

To edit any document, just click on Insert on the Word taskbar at the top of your document. On the dropdown menu, click on Comment. The Comment will appear in the right margin on whatever line your mouse cursor was on. The comments will be sequentially numbered as you insert them. You can mark a word, a phrase, a sentence or even a punctuation mark for a comment. The editor will underline your selection and draw a line to the margin and the comment.

If you want to change a comment, move it or delete it, just right click on it, scroll down and click Delete. You can also cut and paste comments or you can also look up words in the built-in dictionary. If you delete any comment, the comments will automatically re-number themselves.

Besides your marginal comments, you are still free to make notations in colour anywhere you wish. When you're finished, if you don't already know this, you can email it directly to anyone. Just click on File>Send to>Mail Recipient.

(From Chip)

There are three important elements to every story. These are:

Character, Conflict and Conclusion.

1. Character:

The most essential element in all stories is character. There is no story without central characters to bring alive the plot you have in your mind. However, just as you are not all that interested in the strangers you pass in the street, you will need to introduce your characters in such a way that your reader will want to get to know them better. To do this, you have to know your characters as well as you know your own family. Whenever you write a character into a story you must provide various characteristics to make them familiar to the reader. You do this with description; mannerisms; dialogue; and usually one or two idiosyncrasies – just like real people (or even animals).

For the reader to visualize a character doing or saying something, they must connect it with truth. There can't be any niggling doubts about authenticity. Each character should own their space in the story. It should be apparent to the reader within a short time of a character's introduction what they can expect from each character. Importantly, there should be some conflict between some of the characters. Any story without fully fleshed out characters and some character conflict is boring. And yet it's important to make sure all is believable, because if the reader feels remote or estranged from the imagined space of your storyline (because they are questioning a character's actions or dialogue) the pace of the plot will be interrupted and they will feel less inclined to continue reading your story.

2. Conflict:

You need this to make the story interesting. Think of this as what happens in the journey between the opening pages and the conclusion. It's not that much of a story if you go to the shops to buy a loaf of bread and come home with it in your shopping bag, having had a nice conversation with your baker friend.

However, we have the beginning of a story if you set out for the shops, and on the way a car pulls over to the kerb, and you watch (horrified) as two men with stockings covering their faces jump out and grab a young woman (who has been walking on the footpath beside you), and you see them shove her roughly into the backseat of the car. You run off and hide in a (convenient) nearby garden and you take down the number plate details of the car as you also note the clothing of the men and their hostage. You then call the police on your mobile phone.

For the sake of a story we now have a protagonist (you), two antagonists (the men) and an enigmatic girl (for a sense of mystery). The reader will follow the process of finding a successful resolution (outcome/conclusion) to the issues you've presented: *Who are the men? Who is the girl? Why have they taken the girl? Where will they take her? Will your phone call to the police mean they arrive in time to save the girl? Or will there be a delay in precious time, resulting in the 'baddies' getting away? Or perhaps the men realise you present a threat and they decide to hunt you down.*

3. Conclusion:

Every story could end in a hundred different ways. The reader will stay interested as long as they are committed to the characters and your job as the writer is to have a fair idea how you want the plot to end. In the story we began above, you may have decided you want to make the point that young girls are not safe on the streets and police are bungling fools. In this version, the poor girl meets with a horrible fate and the cops don't get anywhere in solving the case. You (the narrator) have to take matters in your own hands, and on nothing more than your accidental witness, you are the hero who brings the baddies to justice. On the other hand, you might want to suggest that young girls are well equipped to look after themselves and you write the plot to prove this notion, using a very strong female protagonist.

Having this idea of where you want the plot to go is called the 'premise' or 'quest'. It keeps you focused on your writing and stops the tendency to go off on (often interesting, but not meaningful to the story) deviations. However, although you may begin with a premise,

you also have to be prepared for a character to 'take over' your story. If this happens, you will have to adapt the ending to suit the characters inclination. In the above story, the men may turn out to be lovable rogues who were only pretending to kidnap the girl for a stupid prank and you (the narrator) decide, after getting to know them, to let them off by with-holding your evidence from the courts.

The important thing is for the reader to feel satisfied with your ending. If you want the girl to be important, focus on her. If the men are more important, focus on their lives. If the narrator is the one learning some type of life lesson, then of course the reader should know more about that character. The character is what is most important and the success of every story rests on how you manage your characters. They have to be doing interesting things and they have to reflect life in every way (some would say they should be larger than life). 'Good' characters should have some believable faults and flaws. 'Bad' characters should have some endearing elements. For instance, a crook might be attached to his dog and treat him exceptionally well.

Cause and effect should follow a well defined course. If you have tragedy in one chapter, balance it with humour in the next. Never write each chapter the same. Like life, there has to be rhythm – the ups and downs that leave us hoping for something better, or fearing loss of happiness. At the conclusion of every story, the loose ends should be tied down. Even if it is your intention to leave the outcome open to some speculation there, nevertheless, still has to be a sense of closure. In the story we began with the girl being taken from the street, you might want to finish with the capture of the men but not go into the court case or the surmised punishment. Just bear in mind, no matter how short the story, there has to be a satisfactory ending or the reader will feel cheated.

And for a writer that means you will have one less buyer for your next book!

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