

**Dismembering the Bestseller**  
From the May 2010 Write Brain  
Presenter: Bonnie Ramthun  
Article by Michael Shepherd

You know what they say about dismemberments. They can be a lot of fun—as long as you don't lose an arm or a leg in the process.

When faced with an opportunity to dismember the work of bestselling authors at the May Open Meeting, all appendages stayed in place for the PPW members who honed their writing skills with an able assist from author Bonnie Ramthun. Bonnie presented her lecture, “Dismembering The Bestseller,” which provided attendees a clinical approach to identify a story's beating heart, stressed how to stimulate manuscripts badly in need of resuscitation, and taught how to strengthen cadaverous plots through the use of skeletons—all while having a bloody good time.

Herself a bestselling author, Bonnie explained how writers who struggle with their manuscripts must learn to first identify the heart of the story—the element that keeps it vividly alive—in order to infuse the words with a discernable pulse. She cautioned against forming an attachment to “pretty writing” that serves no value to the story, and encouraged authors to evaluate their own manuscripts to find dead pieces that, while written well enough to make mothers proud and old people cry, do not connect to the heart of the story.

Noting that every great novel contains a knockout beginning, some sort of turn-around or catalyst, a number of sub-plots, a second catalyst that leads to a climax and then a final plot wrapup with an exciting conclusion, Bonnie diagrammed a plot line skeleton to help writers develop their work in a similar vein. She reminded listeners that a plot line skeleton is much like a human skeleton: one is hardly discernable from another, and it is the accoutrements humans add that make them unique. Similarly, it is upon the universal plot line skeleton that each writer can hang his or her creative prose to produce a distinctive, one-of-a-kind story.

The placement of pinch points, which are events where a character shows his or her true nature and highlights the psychological underpinning of the story, is crucial. If they occur too early or too late, the story can easily lose its sense of rising excitement and tension. While writers often develop compelling opening scenes and dramatic endings, without well-placed pinch points, the middle of a manuscript may wallow in a veritable Sahara of dryness. To combat this, effective pinch points can serve as a welcome oasis.

Bonnie used multiple examples to reinforce the concept of pinch points. In *Silence of the Lambs*, the first pinch point occurs when Hannibal Lecter gives Clarice the location of a storage facility where she finds the head of one of Buffalo Bill's victims. In their twisted relationship, this is akin to him giving her a dozen red roses. In the second pinch point, Lecter gives Clarice the map of Buffalo Bill's murders, which ultimately helps her break the case and find the killer.

In *Where the Wild Things Are*, pinch points center on the monster and boy relationship. In the first pinch point, Max tames the monsters and they make him their king. In the second pinch point, the monsters don't want to let him go, vowing to eat him up, they love him so!

Finally, in the movie *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, the first pinch point is when Toula and Ian fall in love. The second pinch point is when Ian asks Toula to marry him.

Of course, not every bestselling novel uses Bonnie's method for success. She highlighted *The DaVinci Code* as one that strayed wildly from the formula. She lamented, "If Dan Brown had only come to one of my classes, he really would have sold a lot of books."

As a wrap up, Bonnie encouraged authors to spot-check their own writing and compare the ending scene with the opening to ensure they are equally exciting. Authors should critically analyze their work to see if they spend too much time setting the scene of a novel before getting to the heart of the story. She reminded listeners to introduce tension and climax points in the middle of the story, which should be as exciting as the action in opening and closing scenes. Finally, she stressed that in every novel the protagonist should be the character who cracks the case, gets the girl, has the funniest lines, and in some way grows from the journey. If this isn't true of your manuscript, you might be writing about the wrong character.

Or it may be in dire need of dismemberment.

Bonnie says: "I've talked to many writers whose driving goal becomes whether or not they'll be published by a big New York house. They feel this will validate them, and anything less is considered a failure. When I think about writing, I equate it to fly fishing. Every bit of the event has something to be valued. From the beauty of the mountains and the smell of the trees to the crispness of the air and the sound of the rushing water to a perfect cast—all of those things are integral to the fly fishing experience. If you only focus on whether or not you catch a fish, you'll likely miss out on the true enjoyment of what you're doing."

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