

The Business of Writing: In Plotting Popular Fiction, Figure Out Your Bad Guy First

By Linda Rohrbough

At the risk of sounding redundant, I learned another critical tip for writing popular fiction from Jim Frey, author of *How to Write a Damn Good Novel*, that I'd like to share with you. It's about creating plot by figuring out the antagonist first.

I spent a couple of hours every afternoon for about eight days working on various plots with a group of 15 writers, about half of whom were published in fiction. Led by Jim Frey, this was an invitation-only workshop and intense doesn't begin to describe it. We worked over 80 hours and spent easily 20 hours just on plotting. And I can tell you that the plots we consistently got hung up on were the ones where the writers didn't understand their antagonists—their bad guys.

Now you'd think it would be just the opposite: that if you have your protagonist (your hero or your good guy) all figured out—especially what he is afraid of and what his strengths and weaknesses are—you could then figure out your bad guy and your plot. And I've worked with writers who plot that way, especially when it comes to romance novels. But Jim told us that figuring out the bad guy was the critical piece. And every time we started working on a plot and the writer didn't know enough about the bad guy, we got hung up. Actually, hung up was an understatement. We got short circuited. We floundered around for about 15 minutes as a group, throwing out useless ideas that got shot down one after another, until a heavy silence settled over the group. Then we'd table that discussion and go on to someone else's plot. The feeling was the same kind of frustration I've undergone while working alone—that tightness in my chest and a sense of hopelessness like, "I'm never, ever going to figure this out." Ever suffer through that?

Well, here's a news flash. If you're writing popular fiction, and you've got a bad guy, you need to figure him out first. This is because the bad guy drives the plot for quite a while. And your hero or heroine is reacting, at least in the beginning, to the problems the bad guy is causing. A major part of the fun for a reader is unraveling this puzzle you've created. But if you don't know the whole picture of the bad guy going in, how are you going to lead the reader? You can't.

What struck me as interesting was that in each one of these difficult cases, the writer knew the protagonist through and through. Every goal, motivation, and conflict was neatly mapped out. But we still got stalled until we turned the tables and figured out the bad guy. What was his back story? What did he want? What happened? And what was he covering up? When we had that, everything else slid neatly into place like it was meant to be there.

I've also talked in past columns about the trend toward two antagonists: a "good bad guy" and a "bad bad guy." The "good bad guy" is the character your hero is up against, but he is just trying to do his job—like a cop who is trying to solve the crime. The "good bad guy" is an adversary for the protagonist as much or more than the actual bad guy who is making the mess to begin with. In that case, I'd encourage you to figure out the back story, goals, motivations, and conflicts for both your antagonist characters.

If you haven't figured it out already, fiction is complicated. I'm not suggesting a totally linear process here, where you do one thing, like figure out your bad guy, and then move on and never revisit or modify the bad guy again. It isn't like that. But it surprised

me how much easier and better the flow of plotting became when we knew as much about the antagonist going in as we expected to know about the protagonist.

I don't know that I've heard anyone say this but I'm coming to the conclusion that you write a book before the book. I have had award-winning novelists admit to me that they write a book, delete it, start over, and the second book is the one they publish. I do think fiction writing means that you have to know several stories in order to write just one. The bottom line, as my gift to you this month, is this tip: figure out your bad guy's story first. It'll make your writing life easier in the long run.

Linda Rohrbough has been writing professionally since 1989, and has more than 5,000 articles, seven books, and numerous awards for her fiction and nonfiction. Linda's latest book is Weight Loss Surgery with the Adjustable Gastric Band (Da Capo Lifelong Books, March 2008). Visit her Web site: www.LindaRohrbough.com.

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