

The Business of Writing: How NOT to Cheat Your Reader

By Linda Rohrbough

Something I see a lot with new fiction writers is the attempt to create suspense—which can result in cheating the reader. Writers often withhold information in a way they believe builds tension. What it actually does is hurt their credibility and cheapen the story. This summer I learned from James N. Frey, author of *How to Write a Damn Good Novel* and a keynote speaker at the last PPWC, that you create tension by what you tell the reader, not by what you withhold.

Let me give you an example. Let's say we start a story with a woman getting ready for work. She's about to leave when she walks over to her dresser, pulls something out, puts it in her purse, grabs a granola bar, and goes outside to join her carpool. Can't you just see a writer in a critique group defending not telling us what's in the purse because it creates tension? Nah. While writers could get away with a stunt like this 30 years ago, readers are pretty sophisticated now and consider withholding like this a cheat.

If we go back to our principle—create tension by what you tell the reader—we need to change the opening. In this case, you simply let the reader see what she puts in her purse.

Let's go through it again. The woman walks toward the dresser, but this time we see her take out a black leather case. She unzips it to reveal neat rows of small screwdrivers and lock picks. She strokes the tools gently with her fingers, zips the case closed, and puts it in her purse. Then she grabs the granola bar and goes outside to meet her carpool.

Now we sit up and take notice. You've got readers guessing about what she might be getting ready to do. You're using the social prejudices and clichés of our society in a clever way and readers will love you for it. You can lead them around with this woman for awhile and get away with material that in another context would be boring, just because you told them what she put into the purse. In addition, you've created trust. The readers believe you know where your story is going, so they willingly follow.

What your character puts in her purse depends on your story. You could have the woman put a gun in her purse. That's less interesting, but still not a cheat. Or it could be a medical kit with needles and some kind of drug. Or a diamond ring, still in the original Tiffany's box. Whatever you choose, the reader imagines where you're going, which leaves you with an inquiring-minds-want-to-know situation. You've created a lot more tension by telling than by NOT telling.

Obviously, there's some withholding here. But the reader is okay with that, because you've taken him into your confidence. The other danger, however, is writer diarrhea where the author blurts out a bunch of backstory that not only bores the reader but deflates the carefully crafted tension.

You need to know the backstory, but you usually don't have to worry about translating it to the reader. He can pick it up in nuances you throw in, like if our gal has graying hair in a bun and wears SAS shoes, you don't have to tell us she hasn't had a date in the last 10 years. Or if she's wearing a new Prada suit and gets into a Mercedes instead of carpooling, we know she has money and a good job. You can also tell backstory in bits you sprinkle in. Perhaps someone in the carpool asks how she's doing today and is shooshed by the others, who whisper that today is the one year anniversary of her

brother's death. However you do this, you don't stop or stall to give us backstory—you keep the action moving forward.

This is a simple principle—creating tension by what you tell the reader, not by what you withhold—but it's an important one. I've found this concept improved my storytelling along with making my writing process more exciting and fun. I hope it'll do the same for you.

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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