

The Fire in Fiction

From PPWC 2010 Add-on Workshop

Presenter: Donald Maass

Article by Fleur Bradley

The room was packed on Sunday afternoon. Tired but eager faces filled the room, all looking forward to what agent Donald Maass, author of *The Fire in Fiction*, had to say. Some attendees had pitched and gotten manuscript requests during the conference, and were now wondering: Is my manuscript really the best it can be?

Donald Maass got his workshop started quickly, challenging us to look at our opening pages. Does the protagonist demonstrate strength, humanity or hope right away? He explained that no matter the type of fiction you're writing, it's important to find a way for readers to connect to the lead character early on—in the first five pages, or earlier if possible. Maass challenged us to mine our own experiences, and look at people we admire for examples of desirable traits in a protagonist. “Make your character human and real right away,” he said.

Next, Maass had us work on ways to add inner conflict by making the protagonist's quest as difficult as possible. “How can your character give up for good?” he asked, challenging us to build our stories to a moment where the protagonist could logically surrender. Maass then had us explore extreme ways for our characters to throw in the towel. “Inner conflict makes characters more memorable,” he said. “Take your character all the way out there and let it be.”

“Who's the big bad guy?” Maass asked next, sharing some stories about the cardboard villains his agency sees a lot in manuscript submissions. He then explained the importance of developing the antagonist, and making sure he or she is as three-dimensional as possible. Maass suggested we look at our stories from the antagonist's perspective, and connect the bad guy to the protagonist in new ways. “Find a reason your antagonist wants to know your protagonist,” he said. As an exercise, we all wrote down some stereotypes related to our antagonists, and found ways to go against these predictable qualities. “Find a way your antagonist can be sympathetic,” Maass suggested. He added that oftentimes, the antagonist doesn't appear active in the story. He suggested we find four new ways for the protagonist and antagonist to cross paths, to add conflict and depth to the story.

During the last segment of the workshop, we looked at scenes in our manuscripts that didn't really work, to deconstruct them with Maass' help. He asked us to look at the purpose of each scene, and how it has changed the story or protagonist. “Mark this moment with more definition,” he said of this changing point. Then he gave us several minutes to rewrite the scenes. Maass suggested that we step away from the words we already wrote, and instead try to recreate what happened with new writing.

Even though the workshop lasted more than four hours, time seemed to fly as we explored exciting new ways to bring our manuscripts to life. “Are you going to use what you came up with?” Donald Maass asked us with a smile. Throughout the room, weary but excited writers nodded—we all knew we would be dissecting our manuscripts based on what we'd just learned. He urged us to press on when we feel resistant to changes, or when we feel reluctance over the

challenges the protagonist is up against with plot changes we make. "Why do we do this?" he asked. "Because we're storytellers."

As Donald Maass said more than once during his great workshop, "The things that are hardest to do in your edits are the things you need to do most."

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