Three Approaches to Story Structure
From the October 2008 WriteBrain
Presented by Daniel Abraham
By MB Partlow

Why can't you build a good stadium in Poland?

If you missed the October Write Brain with Daniel Abraham, you not only missed a fascinating talk on the subject of plot, but you missed a heck of a good time, too.

Daniel began by telling us that defining plot is like nailing Jello to a two-by-four. Either your definition is specific and precise and smells kind of funny (the order in which the characters experience the events of the story), or it's accurate but so vague as to be useless (what happens in the story).

Stuff happens all the time, we were told. This does not make it plot. Plot moves you toward a particular end. He said, and we made him repeat, "Plot is the dramatized scenes and summarized information delivered in a sequence to create and resolve dramatic tension." When some of us mere mortals said, "Huh?" he simplified: "The stuff you put in to make people care and provide a pay off."

There's no way, in the space available here, to adequately describe the diagrams and lists Daniel put on the white board, or to convey his odd lapses into a Scottish accent, or to retell all of his jokes. The man should be on *Letterman*.

First, Daniel detailed the "punch line model", which compares the plot to a joke. You make a promise (the set-up), and leave it hanging there until the last line on the last page is read. Tension, Daniel said, is all about withholding. Plot helps you withhold.

As examples, Daniel cited the Kinsey Milhone series (A is for Alibi and so on), and two short stories by Stephen King— "Quitters, Inc." and "The Boogeyman." However, many writers include some "falling action" after the punch line so that the plotlines are neatly tied off and tidied.

The other two models build on the punch line model. First is the "fairy tale model," which traditionally involves three trials. Each trial has its own punch line, and ideally the trials get bigger each time. The story opens with an introduction or frame, such as "A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away." After the third trial is resolved, you have to touch base with that frame again and show the result of having passed through the trials.

The third model is "nested tales," with the classic example being Arabian Nights.

Daniel then got into the nitty gritty of building a plot. The left column of the white board was labeled "Literal Action," and the right column became "Its function in the story." Daniel walked us through an example which would take the rest of the newsletter to duplicate with any clarity.

Basically, you can write the right side of the chart without the story specifics. Step one, introduce the setting and the protagonist. In our example, step two was to display the protagonist's unease with himself, which still leaves you about a skabillion ways to interpret your story. Is your protagonist a concert pianist struck with stage fright? A plucky young woman who just lost the family fortune? A minotaur transferring to a new labyrinth who is shy about revealing his lack of horn?

Step three ratchets up the conflict by introducing the love object and the rival. In step four, the rival exposes the protagonist's weakness. Then in step five, a mentor

reframes the issue for our hero. This is followed by the love object showing empathy for the hero and dissatisfaction with the rival. Finally, the hero faces down the rival and achieves that everelusive prize: self-actualization.

While the example was fun (did you know we were talking about the minotaur?), what Daniel wanted to illustrate was how every scene in your story should support your plot and move your story forward. Clever scenes filled with witty repartee are fine and good, but if they don't serve any purpose, you're cheating your characters as well as your readers. And if you take the time to jot down the point of your scenes and how they move your plot, you can see the pot-holes and dead zones before you start to write.

To me, Daniel's ideas sound dangerously like more-productive writing time. And since he's published seven novels, a couple dozen short stories, and won an International Horror Guild Award, he obviously knows what he's talking about when it comes to plot.

The last thing he told us: You can't build a good stadium in Poland because no matter where you sit, you end up behind a Pole.

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