

Writing Better Action Scenes
From the March 2010 Write Brain
Presenter: Marc MacYoung
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“Technology hates me,” Marc MacYoung said as he slammed down the lid to his virus infected laptop. “Die, Vista! Die!” As the colors on the projector screen faded into white, Marc abandoned his slide presentation to tell us about time-tested conflict patterns, and how we could use them in our writing. Marc would know. He’s a leading expert on how to survive high-risk situations, and teaches personal defensive strategies to military and law enforcement personnel, among others. Marc opened by telling us, “Every night you go to bed with a human, a monkey, and a lizard. The human brain is the logical side of you, the monkey brain is the emotion, and the lizard brain is pure survival. All three follow a script, and, as a writer, you have to know the scripts.” He went on to say that during violence, all three parts are fighting to “drive the bus,” meaning that each wants control over the situation.

We spent the majority of the time discussing the monkey brain, since it’s the instigator. Marc said the monkey brain equates social violence to physical death and used gang violence as an example. Gang members are often so afraid of humiliation that they’ll kill someone over simple disrespect. Meanwhile, the lizard brain is usually shouting, “Run!” and the human brain is just trying to figure it all out.

To illustrate how the monkey brain works, Marc called up an older gentleman and asked him to stand at the front of the room. Marc walked about seven feet away, and proceeded to cuss him out and make threatening gestures. “Did you feel threatened?” Marc asked when he was done.

“No,” the man answered. “You were posturing.”

Marc smiled. “I was doing a threat display,” he explained. “Most people are looking for a way out of violence.” “Writing about real violence is boring,” Marc said. In real life, “it happens so fast that you don’t remember it.” A person’s first encounter with violence is particularly overwhelming, and he likens it to a room full of TVs. “When somebody’s trying to kill you, all the TVs come on at once. The 70th time somebody tries to kill you, they all come on but you’ve learned how to focus on just a few or one. The reason people freeze during violence is that all three brains scream, ‘I’m in charge!’”

When you’re writing an action or violence scene, remember that ninety-nine percent of it is in the buildup. “Very few people can go from zero to one hundred with violence.” Marc said. Don’t write about the action itself; write about the emotion behind it.

When you’re writing your antagonist, don’t make him a “mustache twirler”. To be believable, Marc said, “Your bad guy has to be doing something he thinks is right and justifiable.”

As for our heroes, Marc told us to identify our hero's "monkey trap": What is the one thing that would make your character say, "I can't walk away"? If you can figure that out, you've got a conflict, and if you've got a conflict, then you've got a story. But be careful, because "if you break the (natural) patterns of conflict, people won't tolerate it."

Marc told a story about a movie director who was approached by someone who'd noticed that the wallpaper on the set had been hung upside down. The director replied, "If people are looking at the wallpaper, there's something wrong with the movie." It's the same with writing action scenes or violence, Marc said. "Nobody's going to notice when you do it right."

Marc MacYoung's Six Things That Will Happen When Someone Tries to Kill You:

1. You die.
2. You spend a long time in the hospital.
3. You run away. (It's hard to get raped, robbed, or murdered when you're not there.)
4. You shoot back.
5. Somebody else shoots back.
6. In the rarest case, the attacker snaps out of their state of mind and the attack stops.

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