

Plot, the Bones of a Story

by PAM CONRAD

“Every story starts with a question that is answered yes or no in the climax.”

WRITING HAS ALWAYS COME EASY to me. The right words seem to flow from my fingertips, lifting me to incredible heights of creative pleasure. In one quiet hour, I can invoke an autumn setting of swirling dry leaves and bright clouds piled high into the sky, and in that setting conjure up a character—a pregnant woman with an acorn clasped in her gloved hand. I can take these elements and make them rich with meaning, weave a dialogue between her and her husband of such poignancy and depth that I could have a reader sobbing over the pages.

But plot? Forget about it! That has *never* come easy to me. When I first started writing, it seemed that all I was capable of was snatches of life, *meaningful* snatches of life, but like a stack of colorful patches that doesn't make a quilt, my

Popular with readers from pre-schoolers to adults, PAM CONRAD's books have won wide critical acclaim and are frequently cited on such prestigious lists as the ALA Notable Children's Books, *The New York Times* Notable Books, The Boston Globe-Horn Book Fiction Honor Book, Recommended Books for the Reluctant Young Adult Reader, and many more. Her recent adult novel, *Pumpkin Moon*, was published by Harcourt Brace. In addition to her books, her work has appeared in numerous magazines.

story ideas didn't quite make themselves into meaningful stories either. So, as an enthusiastic would-be writer, I went on a quest to discover what this elusive thing called "plot" was all about.

I took workshops and seminars, attended conferences and author talks, and whenever there was any mention of plot, I scribbled away frantically. I read every article and took out every book I could find about plot, and eventually discovered that playwrights and screenwriters understand plot better than anyone.

It was in a screenwriting class that I was given the best tool I was ever to learn. It dated back to Aristotle and was called the Major Dramatic Question or, as the instructor called it, the MDQ. It is a simple truth; the writer of sitcoms knows it, the planner of a tightly structured novel knows it, Shakespeare knew it, and the early storytellers sitting around a crackling fire knew it. It is simple: Every story begins with a question that is answered yes or no in the climax. Simple. Absolutely simple.

When a story idea first begins to stir in my mind, I think about the characters, the setting, the time frame, the time period, the style, and the theme, but I always know that until I start thinking about the Major Dramatic Question, the

“To master plot is to create a world in which our characters and settings and dialogues become unforgettable.”

story will have no frame, no skeleton to hang everything else on. In other words until I begin to think of the MDQ, I haven't even begun to write my story.

So let's back up a little. Say I want to write a short story about my pregnant woman and the acorn. I'm thinking about her a lot. I see what she's wearing, even the kind of rake she's using. I see her husband at the curb burning the leaves. Then I begin to ask myself, What is the Major Dramatic Question here? It is like putting popping corn over a low flame. I do it and I wait, shaking the popper patiently.

A pregnant woman and an acorn. I wonder what's going on between her and her husband. I wonder if they have other children. I wonder how far along in her pregnancy she is. And then I wonder if she can see how like an acorn she is, how full of unrealized potential. Aha! Perhaps *this is my MDQ. Will this woman realize how absolutely powerful she is? How—exactly like the acorn—she is ripe with potential?*

FINE. That satisfies me. So I have the bones of my story, the underlying skeleton, but this animal called *Story* is more than bones. There must be muscles and blood and organs and energy, and this is where the rest of the plot elements come into play. We all know them as TENSION, CONFLICT, PARADOX, and COMPLICATIONS or sometimes OBSTACLES. By this stage, I am ready to take one element at a time. I begin by sitting in front of my keyboard, then to think about what each element means in this specific story.

Over the years, I have come up with my own definitions of these elements, ways to look at these energies that can help me develop my idea to its next level.

I've come to see TENSION as the condition that already exists as the story opens. So I ruminate and look for the tension. In writing a previous story, I discovered that an emerging character was

growing very old and had an urgent need to tell her grandchildren a story about her life before her time ran out. In another story, a character was a young girl who loved her father and watched as her divorced mother began to date. Tension is what makes us grind our teeth in our sleep; it's the tremor in a story that holds our attention.

So I get back to the woman raking, and her husband burning the leaves. I see the strain on his face and in his hands as he rakes slowly. I hear her sigh. I begin to know that she has had one other pregnancy that was not successful. This pregnancy feels tenuous to her and to him as well. And they are not speaking of it to each other. Here lies the tension.

Then I look for the CONFLICT. I believe conflict is the result of the interaction between present circumstances and the strong need of the main character. In one of my books, a young child on a Nebraska prairie wants to read the books her new neighbor has, but as this neighbor weakens with madness and loneliness, it becomes more and more difficult for the child to be there. In another novel I wrote, a woman tries to get a man to stay with her, but he is young and elusive, and she is unsure of herself, especially in matters of love.

To get back to my raking couple . . .

I remember times I've been with couples whose conflict has been absolutely palpable to those around them. At first it's not apparent what it's about, but gradually pieces become obvious, and outsiders learn what's going on and who's not getting what he or she wants. With my raking couple I sense that he must go away for a while on business, and she doesn't want him to leave because she is afraid he won't be with her for the birth of their baby.

Now the PARADOX. Ambivalence in human nature can stir up tremendous incidents of paradox. And some degree of ambivalence is present in every person, every character. Even the most

loving of couples at times wonder what their lives would be like if one or the other would somehow suddenly, painlessly disappear. Perhaps the raking man is torn. He must go away on a trip that is very important for his career. He wants to be with his wife for the birth, but actually he is glad to be called away: He is afraid, because he loves her so much. So I see them on the cusp of some decision, some revelation. She wants and she wants, and he does and he doesn't.

Next, I consider the **COMPLICATIONS** or **OBSTACLES**. In writing a short story, I tend to think in terms of complications rather than obstacles, because for me complications seem more subtle, more delicate, requiring deeper thought and care. I tend to see obstacles as something bolder—glaciers to climb, villains to slay or forces to subdue.

But both **COMPLICATIONS** and **OBSTACLES** are elements that enter the story to heighten the energy. They are roadblocks set up to keep the main character from getting what she wants. Depending on the depth and breadth of my story, they can be simple dialogue developments or, actual time bombs, each having an attack, a rise to climax, and its own a resolution. For me, it's always a good idea to organize the obstacles in order of increasing intensity, and I know that the surmounting of each complication or obstacle will bring my main character closer to the fulfillment of his or her need.

WHEN writing a story of survival on the 19th-century prairie of Nebraska, I began by making a list of all the possible things that could go wrong for anyone living on the prairie, from minor inconveniences to tragedies. The list looked something like this:

- Not having any books.
- Having to collect buffalo chips.
- Having to carry water from far away.
- Snakes.
- Heavy rain.
- Isolation.
- Locust plagues.
- Tornadoes.
- Prairie fires.
- Hostile Indians.
- Fear.
- Death.

And for my couple raking leaves? What can keep my main character, the pregnant woman,

from getting what she wants—her husband's presence at the birth of their baby? I brainstorm:

- His need to go on the business trip.
- His seeming indifference to her needs.
- His own fear of the birth.
- His secret thought that he has considered never coming back.

SOME writers worry about overplanning a story, fearing that outlining a plot robs it of its spontaneity. But over years of teaching writing, I have discovered that the most futile thing you can do is try to convince that kind of writer that advance plotting may be helpful. The best I have been able to do, when I have finished reading their stories, is to point out the MDQ, the tension, and so forth that they have accomplished intuitively.

But intuition doesn't help me much when I'm plotting a story. And I'd guess that it is not always a hundred percent dependable even for people who regularly count on it. I am a thrifty writer. I hate to waste anything, and as a result I never feel that I have "over-thought" the story, or that the fun of discovery is gone. Because even though I have carefully thought out the background and the general direction the story might take, I have no idea what these two people will say to each other. Perhaps a neighbor will drive by and say something to them about burning and pollution. Maybe they will decide to plant the acorn together. Or perhaps she will never tell him she has found the acorn. I won't know until I begin the actual writing.

The one thing I do know is that I like the stories I read—and therefore stories I write—to be "life-affirming," so my MDQ will always be answered *yes* in the climax. The pregnant woman will most certainly realize how absolutely powerful she is. She will see that like the acorn, she is ripe with potential. Will her husband give up his trip and stay with her? Will he leave? I will discover these things as I go along, as I spend time with this couple and grow to know them and realize how like me they are in their fears and their ambivalences.

This plot process of mine, as you can imagine, does not take place in one sitting. Sometimes it may take many hours, a few gallons of coffee,

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a walk with the dog, a phone call; or sometimes it can take months. It often seems to me that writing is 90% thinking and 10% scribbling.

Having analyzed plotting as a good paleontologist studies a puzzling bone, I can finally say that plotting comes easy to me, as well, besides being endlessly satisfying. For whether the audience is a clan of cave people sitting around a night fire or suburban commuters reading our novels on the 5:55 train home, it is not enough for us simply to create images and move readers to tears. Plot goes deeper, to something so satisfying and so mysterious, that to master it is to create a world in which our characters and settings and dialogues become unforgettable. □

What Makes A Good Spy Thriller?

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it illustrates how well this device can work. Rosewall is telling us a great deal about Antony Ryder. And in the *tone* of his responses, Ryder is telling us a great deal about himself.

Premise, plot, and character. Once you have them in position, you're ready to begin your novel. You may still have problems to solve as you write, but you will have launched a successful plan of attack.

But wait! I almost forgot. I wanted to tell you how a spy thriller differs from a literary novel. Answer: It doesn't. Every great thriller has the architecture of a literary novel. The best of these works transcend category. They soar away from a specific genre into that mysterious landscape of great literature where books never die. □

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