

I Stayed Up Until 4:00 AM: Creating and Maintaining Suspense

SouthWest Writers

October 3, 2015

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“Don’t tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass.” –Anton Chekhov
“The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug.” – Mark Twain

A. INTRODUCTION

i. Take what you want and leave the rest.

What a writer ... "wants is a set of rules on what to do and what not to do in writing fiction...."when one begins to be persuaded that certain things must never be done in fiction and certain other things must always be done, one has entered the first stage of aesthetic arthritis, the disease that ends in pedantic rigidity and the atrophy of intuition." — John Gardner, The Art of Fiction

B. SUSPENSE – DEFINITION

- i. Not just action and dead bodies – every book needs suspense
- ii. Keeps the reader turning the pages until 4 AM
 - Builds apprehension and anticipation in the minds of your readers
 - Think: Worry equals suspense
 - Always have an unanswered question in the reader’s mind (What happens next?)
- iii. Suspense builds as danger approaches and we care!

C. HOW TO CREATE SUSPENSE

- i. Four factors (Steven James)
 - Reader Empathy
 - Reader Concern
 - Impending danger (emotional or physical)
 - Escalating Tension (See Turning Points)
- ii. If you don’t hook your readers, they won’t get into the story. If you don’t drive the story forward by making readers worry about your main character, they won’t have a *reason* to keep reading.
- iii. The basic narrative fuel is always the slow unveiling of the final answer. (Lee Child) – if you want to build suspense, postpone it
 - Suspense happens in the moments between the promise of something dreadful and its arrival.

D. STORY ELEMENTS TO CREATE SUSPENSE

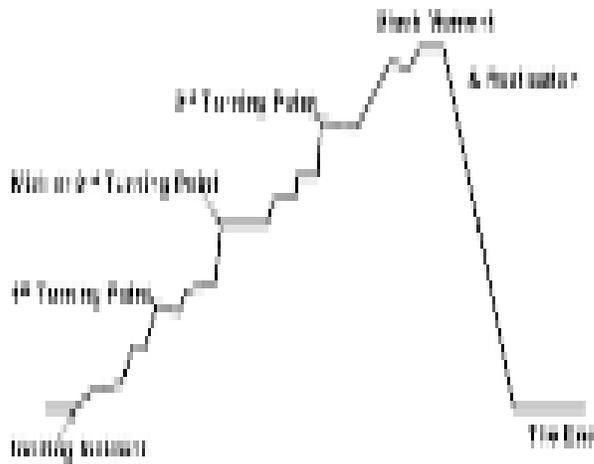
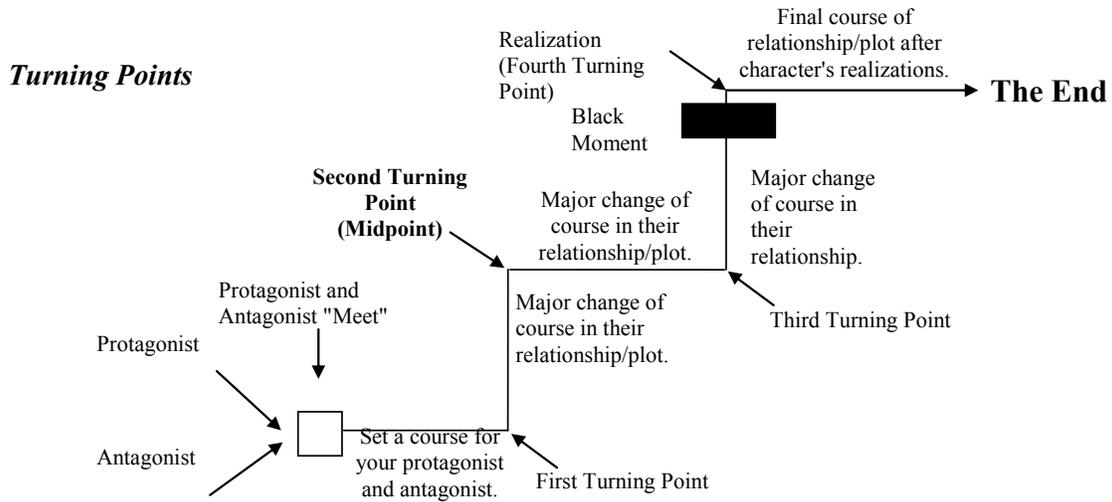
- i. Hook the reader
 - Openings
 - Beginning Hooks (chapters and scenes)
 - Ending Hooks (first page, third page, scene, chapter, book):
 1. Threat of Danger (Emotional or Physical)

2. Shock Factor
 3. Ending Question
 4. Ending Prediction
- ii. Make the reader care through characters that readers care about
- Put them in jeopardy (physical and/or emotional)
 1. Make it personal (not just a world in danger, Grandma lives there)
 2. Isolate the character so choices are limited
 - GMC
 1. Goal: How much a character cares about his goal is in direct proportion to how much the reader will care (Laura DeVries)
 2. Motivation – why he wants it and what makes it important
 3. Conflict – what’s stopping him from getting it and what are the stakes (what terrible consequences will result if he doesn’t get it?)
 - Character Arc
- iii. Surprise the reader
- Character Surprises – character vs. characterization
 1. Who your character appears to be, isn’t who he is.
 2. Emotional responses
 - Plot Surprises
 1. Set up expectations and keep your promises in unexpected ways
 - List of 20
 2. Shift the character's reality
 3. Push the readers’ emotional buttons
 - Actions don’t drive the story; actions drive emotion; emotions drive the story (Laura Baker)
 4. Use Turning Points (Plots and Subplots)
- iv. Drive the Story Forward
- Scene and Sequel
 - Definition of Scene: GOAL – CONFLICT – DISASTER
 - Definition of Sequel: EMOTION – QUANDARY – DECISION – ACTION
 - Arc of the Scene
 - Let the reader in on a secret so they worry about what’s coming
 1. Anticipation of difficulties to come
 - Each time you remove an obstacle, uncover one more.
 1. This works best if a character’s choice causes the dilemma

E. TURNING POINTS and REVERSALS

- i. Significant and surprising event, scene or series of scenes which change the direction of your plot or subplot for the character and the reader.
- ii. Turning points illustrate deep character, theme, braiding of internal/external conflict, layering through conflict, action, emotion and surprise
 - Attack your character's flaw
- iii. Escalate the stakes as you go from turning point to turning point. (escalate tension)
- iv. Build plot and emotions to and away from turning points (Arc of the TP)

- Major turning points every 20-25,000 words (or so) for a novel.
- No sagging middles



Story Board

For a 20-Chapter Book with Four Turning Points

1	2	3	4	5
Story's Inciting Incident				First Turning Point
6	7	8	9	10
				Mid or Second Turning Point
11	12	13	14	15
				Third Turning Point
16	17	18	19	20
		Black Moment	Realization	

Fourth Turning Point

- F. Take Advantage of Arcs**
 - i. Character, Scene, Chapter, Turning Points, Book**

- G. Activate Your Writing**
 - i.** Dialogue is the best way to show character and emotion.
 - ii.** Is there a "zinger" on every page?
 - iii.** Word Choices
 - iv.** Active words
 - v.** SPICED

- H. Conclusion**
 - i.** Trust your instincts
 - ii.** Find Your Own Process and Don't Edit Out the Passion
 - iii.** Let your Voice Shine Through.
 - iv.** It's YOUR story, but always ask WHY?!
 - v.** Ray Bradbury says, "There is only one type of story in the world--YOUR story."

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BIOGRAPHY

Award-winning, international bestselling author and RITA® finalist Robin Perini has hit the Top 5 on Amazon Bestseller lists in the U.S., UK and Germany. Devoted to giving her readers fast-paced, high-stakes adventures with a love story sure to melt their hearts, she invites readers to “Step into the Crossfire” with her romantic thriller novels, which Publishers Weekly call ‘refresh[ing] romantic suspense’ and RT Book Reviews calls “edge-of-the-seat, gripping suspense...with memorable and scarred characters who readers care about.”

Robin’s strong characters and tightly woven plots have garnered her numerous awards. After winning the prestigious Romance Writers of America® Golden Heart® in 2011, she went on to sell fourteen novels in a little over two years, which tests her sanity on a regular basis. Robin works for an advanced technology corporation as an analyst. You can find out more information at her website www.robinperini.com or visit her on Twitter (@RobinPerini, Facebook (RobinPeriniAuthor), Goodreads or Pinterest. Her literary agent is Jill Marsal of the Marsal Lyon Literary Agency.

MONTGOMERY JUSTICE NOVELS (Amazon’s Montlake Romance)

- In Her Sights (November 2011) • Behind the Lies (April 2013)
 Game of Fear (August 2014) • Edge of Deceit (2016)

CARDER TEXAS CONNECTIONS (Harlequin Intrigue)

- Finding Her Son (March 2012) • Cowboy in the Crossfire (July 2012)
 Christmas Conspiracy (December 2012) • Undercover Texas (June 2013)
 The Cradle Conspiracy (December 2013) • Secret Obsession (August 2014)
 Christmas Justice (December 2014) • Rodeo Justice (2016)

DARK GUARDIANS (Thursday Publishing)

- Night of the Jaguar (Novella) (October 2014) • The Ultimate Price (2016)