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What Is Plotting (And Why Is It So Hard?)

● Plot Is....

From a fiction writer's perspective, plot (the thing that is plot, not the act of plotting) is simple. Easy to comprehend, clear, plain, sensible.

Plot is the series of events that move the characters and story forward.

So to plot out a story or a book, all you have to do is come up with those events. Easy as falling off a log.

Riiiiiiiiiiiiight.

You'd better sit down. Maybe take a couple of deep breaths. I have a few things to tell you about what I've discovered about plotting over the last thirty-some novels and seventeen-plus years, and what I have to say includes good news, bad news, and news that could well make you run away screaming. Or want to, anyway.

● Where Plots Are Born

First, plotting comes from three places inside of you.

- Plotting's first home is your logic.

Fortunately for all of us, logic is both a learnable and a teachable skill, and once learned, it doesn't throw curve balls at you. That's the good news. The things you do logically will work the same way every time. I know these logical techniques, I use them regularly, and I can show them to you. It's simple stuff—some of it pretty well known to most writers, some of it original to me, none of it anything that will make you crazy. You sit down to

plot, you break out your logic and the tools that logic uses, and you get to work, and you will get logical, predictable results.

HOWEVER...

Logic is only the first layer in developing plots, because writing fiction is more than just getting from Point A to Point Z in the most practical manner possible. In fact, very little of writing fiction is logical. Logic will give you some nice structures and frameworks, will help you iron out pacing issues and such problems as whether you've seen way too much of Lucy in the first third of the book, and nowhere near enough of Joe, and will allow you to discern whether or not you are being predictable and boring in the middle of the book.

But *content* is not logic's strong point. Logic will not give you passion. It will not give you heart. It will not give you magic.

So.

- Plotting's second home is your life.

The second part of plotting comes from strip mining (or deep-tunnel mining) the people you've known, the places you've been, and the things you've done or seen or loved or hated from the time you were born right up to this very minute. Plus who you have been and who you are now.

From your life, you will rip out the moments when you screwed up, the times when you fell down in front of everyone, the places where you said stupid things, where you dropped the game-winning pop-fly and lost the game for everyone. And you will bring back the pain, the humiliation, the shuddering anguish of being human and fallible like the trophies of experience and mortality that they are, and you will write these things down in new ways, so that your story will be human and recognizable, and people will understand and empathize with your characters. We know each other best through these shared moments of pain and failure and humility, because we have all had them.

And then you will rip out your dreams, your hopes, your hungers and aspirations, the things that get you out of bed every morning, and you will put these on the paper too, because if not everyone dares to dream yet, everyone can be shown that dreaming, yearning, hoping, and fighting to bring those dreams to life is possible. Worthwhile. Some people can be taught to dream, and to know why this matters.

You will give these pains and hopes to your characters, disguised with new names, new faces, and new events, but the pain and the hope are purely yours, and the way you will put them on the paper will create your unique voice. This is where your story gets its heart, and where it gets its passion.

And I can show you how to do this, too. What it comes down to, basically, is stripping your soul bare and pouring it onto the page, disguised as best you can, knowing that there will be more than a few readers who will see straight through your best disguise and right to you. And some particularly vicious readers among them will happily rip apart what they see. And you get to live with what they say, and you have to learn to let it go in order to survive and keep writing.

So I can teach you *how* to do this, but I can't make you do it, and if you don't do it, you'll cut your chances of success drastically.

And that's the bad news, but it isn't the worst news. The run-screaming news. Because you can create logical structures and flowing storylines and emotional, heartfelt scenes, but if you don't manage to get that spark of magic into your story, that intangible bit of something that makes it new and fresh and different and compelling—if you don't manage to harness a bit of magic and nail it to the page, your odds of selling your work are slim.

And magic—that spark of life that will capture your editor's heart and bring The Call to your telephone, and win you readers, is the part of the plot that your subconscious (your Muse) will toss in your direction occasionally. At a whim. In a cranky, recalcitrant

obdurate, obfuscating fashion.

If you beg. Wheedle. Play tricks. Apply the occasional red-hot poker.

Because....

- Plotting's third home is your Muse.

This is where, if you're inclined to such things, you run screaming. Because the parts of plots that make stories grab readers and make them remember what you've written, that make your readers *have* to go out and find your next book, and the one after that, **come from the part of you that you cannot control.**

Here's a confession. After all these years and all the books I've written, I have no better relationship with my subconscious (my freakin' Muse) than I did when I was just getting started. If I go to the door of darkness and I knock timidly and ask for an idea, the voice on the other side will still play the same games we were playing when I got up the courage to go there the first time, with the first story I tried:

"I love you but I'm having a bad hair day. No, I don't love you at all. I don't even like you. I hate you. Go away. I don't know anything. I don't have anything you want. I'm busy, I'm bored, I'm tired, I don't want to play, I have a secret, but I'm not telling you...." And on. And on.

The thing is, while my subconscious and I don't get along any better than we ever did face to face, our working relationship has still changed drastically. This happened out of necessity, and not because my subconscious has suddenly developed reasonableness, or compassion, or a willingness to pitch in for the team.

It's changed because I got my hands on the writing equivalent of a crowbar, some tasty bait, a good live trap, a couple of thumbscrews, and an attitude toward dealing with that pain in the posterior, the Muse, than has given me the majority of the

good stuff, the real magic, in my work.

When I went pro I got deadlines and contracts and people who were waiting for me to fill holes in product lists, and I had to learn how to write every day even when my subconscious wasn't playing nice. The tools came in handy for me, and if you want to make a living at this, they'll come in handy for you, too. So this book contains some useful tools.

- A word of warning on dealing with the subconscious:

There have been writers who have killed themselves because they couldn't come up with anything else to write, and because they had no idea how to grab their Muse by the throat and give it a few good shakes.

There have been writers who have resorted to alcohol and drugs to try to find something good way down deep where the magic dwells, and it has worked for a little while, because, like all Muse-bashing tools, alcohol and drugs gag the conscious self and let the Muse speak. However, eventually, the Muse gets drunk or drugged, too, and the writer's work is lost. I know some of you won't listen to me, because there's this whole dramatic Ernest Hemmingway/Hunter S. Thompson school of the hard-drinking, hard-living writer to contend with, and some people embrace self-destructive behavior because they think it's cool. It obviously doesn't end well.

Don't go there. There are other ways. This book is full of them.

● How Plots Grow

Now that I've warned you about where you'll be finding your plots, let me warn you about the second big issue in plotting. A plot isn't a do-it-and-forget-it, or even a do-it-and-use-it, creation. You'll be creating plot:

- Before you start writing:

At this point in the game, everything seems logical. You've had some sort of idea, you've put together some characters who exist in a specific time and place, and now you're sitting down to figure out what to do with them. The thing is perfect in your head, you haven't made a single mistake on it yet, and all the potential in the world awaits. You get out your index cards, word processor, or notebook, and scribble down the first thing you imagine happening, and then the second, maybe with just one line per scene, maybe with a paragraph. You run, and the story gets twisted, and things happen that you don't like. You stop, you stall, you begin to doubt. Or perhaps....

- While you're writing:

....Perhaps you simply start writing, caught up in the wave of the idea, determined that you'll let the story carry you. Until it doesn't, and you realize that you have sixty thousand words of middle to contend with, and no clue what happens in there. At which point, you drag out the notebook, the index cards, the computer outliner, or some other tool.

- While you're revising and editing your first and subsequent drafts:

Or you've managed to make it all the way through your first draft, and you're thrilled. The book has waited on your desk for the requisite month, you're going to read it with fresh eyes and a solid sense of detachment. And you start slamming into whole scenes and storylines that are dull, predictable, insanely convoluted, or pointless; you trip over dropped threads and forgotten characters; and something in the back of your head starts screaming "Burn this before someone reads it" but the saner part of you is pretty sure if you could rework the plot, you could make it into something good.

- **While you're plowing through you're editor's final revisions:**

Or you got everything down the way you liked it (although perhaps with some squidgy bits in there where you feel uneasy, suspecting that something is wrong though you're not sure what), and you've now heard back from your editor, who not only nailed you on every single one of the squidgy bits, but came in with some "fix this" notes on things you'd thought were brilliant, until you read her comments and discovered that she was right, and they weren't. Now you have to fix things, and that's going to include some serious re-plotting.

Don't panic! I've been in all of these places, and re-plotting is part of all of them. A doable, *survivable* part of all of them.

● **Plotting Is A Process, Not An Act**

You have to realize right from the conception of the idea you love that you will not be done with plotting the story of that idea until you are done with the book and it has gone to the copyeditor. A plot is not some fixed and finished document that you work from and follow like a blueprint. A plot is a messy, chaotic combination of your logic, your passion, and your Muse's magic that is, at best, as stable as quicksand and as reliable as that uncle on the other side of the family who may show up on time and in his best suit, or who may show up three hours late, drunk off his feet and singing *You Shook Me All Night Long*.

You deal with this by bracing yourself, making sure your sense of humor is turned all the way to Extra-High, and breaking out your Muse-taming toolkit.

So let's get to it.