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Tool 11: Theme and Concept

At this point you have gone through **Question, Twist, Cliffhanger, Character, Line-For-Scene Take One, Conflict, Language, Culture, Map and Terrain, and Throwing Stuff Against A Wall** (though if we're lucky, not literally). On your board, you have a nice pile of line-for-scene cards—probably around ten of them so far, but maybe more. You might have spent some time getting them into an order you like, and you probably have a good idea of what your story is going to be about.

It's time to start looking for your story's soul.

Things you need to know to do this:

- **Your theme is the unifying idea of your story**, the underlying moral, the writer's struggle to make sense of the world and create order out of chaos.
- **Your sub-themes are secondary unifying ideas** that may or may not relate to the main theme, but that explore other issues of importance to the characters and the story.

Here's the process of finding your themes for the book.

Pull out the plot cards and put them into a reasonable temporary order. Earlier, I debated one story order where we opened the book with Bob becoming Dead Bob in Anna's office, and one where we started far later in the story, with the thug breaking into Anna's house to kill her, and where we flashed back to the Dead Bob scene. For now, at least, I've decide to go linear, and start with Dead Bob. Here are the rest of the line-for-scene cards I've done so far, now in tentative working order:

- **Dead Bob**—A man Annalise knows only by sight is murdered in her office while seeking her help.

- **Video Scene**—Annalise, digging through Bob's stuff, discovers his link to something awful going on in the basement of the Smith Building
- **Meet the Accountant**—Brunette Lucy stops into the detective office to talk with Jim and Anna about renting the empty office across from theirs to convert into an accounting office.
- **Blast from the Past**—Anna, fresh from dealing with her lowlife informants, gets a call an old Boston friend, and makes a serious social gaffe. Her friend laughs it off, but Anna, realizing the same slip elsewhere could have gotten her killed, reevaluates her life.
- **Party Time**—Lucy, browbeaten into attending one of her mother's social things, calls up the same friend, a divorced childhood neighbor, to take her, and while there, gets an undercurrent of people she used to like watching her with wariness and perhaps disdain. The friend is kind and encouraging.
- **Lawyer Scene**—Annalise plays hockey with cop friend while grilling him about the investigation into the lawyer's death which occurred a week earlier in the same building.
- **Hooker Scene**—Annalise tries to track down the hooker who disappeared from Smart Company Escorts
- **Thug Scene**—A thug breaks into Annalise's house and she barely escapes out the window, as he shoots after her
- **Dog-Walking**—Anna runs into redhead Lucy when Lucy is walking her dog outside the Smith Building
- **Stake-out**—Jim and Anna argue sports while staking out the place where they think the thug lives, finally agreeing to disagree about everything except that baseball is the perfect radio sport, while almost missing blonde Lucy walking right

by them, but with the same dog.

- **Mom Scene**—Lauren gets Annalise on the phone and demands she come home, while Annalise is chasing a suspect through downtown traffic.
- **Friend Scene**—Annalise realizes she is being watched while she and the friend are walking to a movie
- **Partner Scene**—The partner (Jim) tries to talk Annalise out of pursuing Bob's death after someone ransacks the office
- **Music Scene**—Annalise loses herself in playing the cello while trying to figure out who is trying to kill her
- **Surprise**—Anna, trying to get the better of Lucy, who is stalking her through the Smith Building in complete darkness, discovers Lucy's freshly-murdered body.

The first thing you'll notice with your plot cards is how thin they feel without all the supporting background material behind them. You have the story filling out in your head, but the skeleton is very bare and has some huge time and place gaps. You may also find cards that no longer fit the story as you envision it. I'm no longer sure about the the death of the lawyer, for example. Don't throw these cards away. Just move them to the bottom of the board and pin them there as possible other avenues to explore.

Imperfection is necessary at this point. You'll keep filling in gaps as you go, and all the places where you see scenes you could add are places where your Muse is working with you. Don't add extra cards now, though. Instead, glance over the bare bones and make notes about the elements in the story the cards you already have represent.

For me, the struggle between Anna and her need for order, shattered when Bob was murdered in her office and right in front of her, pops out first.

- Order versus Chaos

Then there's the struggle between Anna's old life into which she was born—the life she fled at age 18, but which still hasn't let go of her, and her new life, which she chose.

- The Past versus the Present, or maybe Autonomy versus Duty.

Then there's the obvious fact that she has stepped into the middle of something nasty and much more complex than it first appeared, and that now she's a target.

- Life versus Death.

And then there is a clear sports subthread:

- Hockey versus inferior sports.

(I pause until screaming subsides.)

Once I have a few possible themes, and have considered using some of them as sub-themes, I move on to the next step.

I write a single sentence describing what I think the book will be about. In this case: When a man is murdered in her office, a detective has to find out why, and discovers layers of evil, a ring of corruption, and betrayal by someone she loves.

Then I write down a one-sentence story arc for the main character. My revised attempt at this is "Anna, determined to find the truth about the man murdered in her office, connects the murder to criminal activities in the building where she works, and traces the network of criminals back to a friend she has trusted with her life."

Finally, I write down my main characters and a concept paragraph of no more than 250 words.

I'll come in with the following tentative example:

Main Characters:

- Annalise
- Jim
- Bob the Corpse
- Lucy
- The guy in the shadows

Concept Paragraph

When the nice wedding videographer across the hall is murdered in detective Annalise (Last Name)'s office as he is asking for her help, Anna decides to find the truth behind his death. Against the advice of friends, colleagues, and her impossible mother, Anna begins digging into his life, uncovering his horrifying secret and following threads deep into a web of lies, double-crosses, assassinations, and greed in search of the hidden puppet-master who has targeted her for death. (80 words)

Meh. The paragraph above doesn't thrill me, but it's a start. I'll revisit it during different phases of the writing and it will change drastically by the time I hit the final revision. For now, though, it gives me a feel for the book itself and what I believe I'm shooting for. And, not inconsequently, it and the other materials in this section give me a way to pitch this project to editors and agents before I've written the whole thing. Pitching partials is useless until you've already completed and sold a first novel, but once you've done that, this is the first part of the process you follow to create a pitch from partial manuscript.

All of this is subject to change. You haven't even started page one of the book yet, and that military maxim *No battle plan survives first contact with the enemy* applies to you and your plot.

Exercise: Theme and Concept

- **Write down a possible theme in fifteen words or less.** Three or four words will usually do the trick. Some of my regular themes are Love Conquers Evil, God Is A Good Guy with Bad PR, Self-Sacrifice Is the Highest Form of Love, and The Individual Can Change the World, but the theme comes from the story you're telling and the characters you're telling it about—it isn't something you impose from the outside. Tacking on a theme that doesn't arise from the story will give you *Preachy Message Book*. And...ick?
- **If you have inklings about any sub-themes, write them down too.** Some people, those with internally organized minds, come up with an idea and, before they've written the first word, know the themes and sub-themes they want to pursue. I don't have a clue about theme or sub-themes until I've had a chance to start writing. I organize my mind externally, with software and on notebook paper, or I'd never get anything done. People with internally organized minds might be able to recognize their final theme and sub-themes before having written three or four hundred pages, too. Me...not so much. But I usually end up with one theme and from three to six sub-themes by the end of my final revision. You may have more or less.
- **Write down what you currently think the book will be about in twenty-five words or less.** Keep it as short as possible, polish it up, and memorize the sucker, because when someone asks you what you're currently working on (an agent or editor, for example), you're going to smoothly recite this line.
- **Write down a one-line story arc for the book's main character.** Here, you shake off anything that might be a sub-theme, anything that might be cool background, anything that is not how your main character moves from the beginning to the end of the action. No flashbacks here, no frills, no fancy writing. This is you knowing what your target is. If you can't see your target, you can't hit your

target. Rewrite it as many times as you need to, but get it right.

- **Write down the main characters, and a concept paragraph of no more than about 250 words describing the story,** sort of like the blurb on the back of a paperback.

As you get each item in this section in line, you'll discover new information that you can use to create new line-for-scene cards. For example: I didn't know that Bob the Corpse covered his basement activities with a fairly successful front business filming weddings. He had a couple of employees who were only aware of that part of the business, and even though they're now out of work, Anna can visit them and get information from both of them on Bob.

So my final activity in this section will be to write out a line for scene for one of these visits: Anna contacts Weye Hanna, Bob's first assistant, to find out about Bob's work, and discovers that Bob almost never filmed the weddings himself, and that his employees found this odd because he was extremely enthusiastic about the art of filming.

- **If you have a line-for-scene idea that came to you while you were working through this material, write it now.**