

Creating Conflict: or, The Joys of Boiling Oil

By Holly Lisle

You're sitting at your desk staring at your manuscript, realizing that you've written ten or fifty or three hundred (ouch) pages in which nothing really happens. People talk to each other and they go places and they do things, but you couldn't find enough suspense in what they're doing to fill a thimble, and you're creeping up on the sneaking suspicion that your book is a wash, your ideas were stupid, and your characters are duds. Or worse, that you are. Maybe it's time to throw in the towel, admit defeat, take your parents' advice and go into the family wax-dummy business.

Don't do that. **You can fix this.** It may not be easy, but if you want to save your characters and your idea and at least some of the work you've already done, you can.

You're going to need to dig a bit. But, hell, if you don't, you're looking at a long future of gluing fake eyebrows on bee byproduct. You have a compelling reason to succeed at this, right? You'll do pretty much anything to avoid the future everybody else planned out for you? Just like they'd do just about anything to have you follow in your father's footsteps and be the next Wax King or Wax Queen.

Yeah.

Well, that's conflict.

You have it in real life. You have something that you want enough that you're willing to suffer for it, work for no pay to get it, endure the slings and arrows of outrageous disbelief and mockery if you can just have it. And on the other side of the fence, the person who is doing the arrow-

slinging has equally compelling reasons for standing in your way.

Now you just have figure out how to move conflict from your life to the page.

There are three types of conflict, and you deal with all three every day, and so should every one of your characters.

Get out your notebook, or open up a new document, or grab your quill and parchment. We're going to do some quick-and-dirty conflict-building.

Meet Bob

Bob Vanilla is twenty-five, he has held a few jobs in his life but nothing that ever thrilled him, he's had a couple of girlfriends, but no one who ever thrilled him, and he has a brother named Jim and a sister named Jane. If ever the Muse tossed out a character born to lie dead on a page, 'twas Bob.

Your job is to fix his life – fiction-writer style. Which means you dip him in batter, dump him in boiling oil, and don't take him out until he's brown and tasty. You're going to mess with his mind, trash his relationships, and top it all off by dropping a comet on his head.

For the Wee Gods of Storytelling declare – THOU SHALT HAVE CONFLICT ON EVERY PAGE.

And if thou wants to sell thy damned story, thou wiltst.

Creating Internal Conflict (Bob against Bob)

Bob wants something. A lot. He wants something so much that he would do almost anything to get it. What does he want?

Maybe he wants to be a championship surfer, riding the waves in Hawaii and bringing home the big-bucks endorsement deals from... uh... Nike Surf or Toe Jam Board Wax.

But Bob is going to have trouble getting what he wants because something inside of him stands in his way.

Maybe Bob is afraid of something. Maybe a sister that you never met, Janet, got eaten by a shark. Maybe Bob almost drowned in a bathtub when he was seventeen, and now he's terrified of more than three gallons of water in any one place.

Or maybe not.

Maybe Bob wants love and passion and a lot of hot sex at least once a week. And is secretly in love with a girl who is beautiful, and kind, and funny, and stacked like a triple-decker beef burger, and who is witty and virtuous but not too virtuous.

And maybe Bob looks like a flounder, and has half the self-confidence.

Maybe he hates his dull life and has always dreamed of becoming an Army Ranger, only he's weak and skinny and just about to become too old to enlist, and he's afraid of the dark, and of snakes, and of being shot at, and he doesn't know if he has what it takes to be a hero. He thinks he might just be a jellyfish.

Whatever he wants, it's the biggest thing in the world to him, the one thing that could, if he got it, drag him out of bed in the wee hours of the morning and keep him up all night. And the first thing that stands in his way is himself.

Your turn.

Write down five different things that he might want with a

passion. Write down five different internal conflicts that stand in the way of his getting what he wants (one for each desire.)

Creating Interpersonal Conflict (Bob against Someone Else)

Okay. You've messed with Bob's head. Good. Hope you made it tough in there for him. Now you're going to cause him problems with the people around him.

Because Bob wants something. A lot. And people around him don't want him to get what he wants.

I'll take Bob and the Army as my working conflict. Bob wants to do something that matters with his life. He wants to go to work every day knowing that he's contributing to something that's bigger than he is; he wants the sense of mission and purpose that a job as a Ranger would give him.

His mother wants him to be safe and stay way the hell out of harm's way.

His father wants him to take over Vanillaville Mini-Widgets and spend the rest of his life making light switches and those little rubber things that cover telephone number-pad keys. (You're not the only one facing a grim future in the family business.)

His current girlfriend, Jill, wants him. She is head-over-heels in love with him (and the nice lifestyle that a VP in Vanillaville Mini-Widgets could give her). She wants him to marry her and settle down in Vanillaville so that her mother can come over and visit every day. Jill also wants fourteen kids, and is determined to get them. From Bob.

And his best friend since kindergarten, Jeff, wants Bob to stay put, because if Bob goes out and does something big and

important with his life, Jeff is going to be left at home playing poker and drinking beer alone – and the dullness of Vanillaville is going to become very sharp and clear to him.

So...

- Bob's mother may cry and fake fainting spells and check herself into the hospital to convince Bob not to go
- Bob's father may lie to the recruiter and tell him Bob has a criminal record
- Bob's girlfriend may poke holes in Bob's condoms
- Bob's best friend may clip out every article of Army Rangers getting hurt or killed in action that he can find

These are the things the people who **love** him are doing to keep him from getting what he wants. Imagine what the guy who can't stand him will do.

Your turn.

Write down five people who want Bob **not** to get what he wants, exactly what each of them wants (and why), and what each of them will do to stand in Bob's way.

Creating External Conflict (Bob [and perhaps others] against Something BIG)

But you aren't done with poor ol' Bob. Hell hath no fury like a writer on a roll, and now, with internal and interpersonal conflicts all brewing at the same time (because Bob didn't suddenly get big and strong and grow a stainless steel backbone when his mother faked the heart attack, after all), you're going to drop one more conflict on his head. The biggie.

Aliens from Bugeyed IV might drop in on Vanillaville and the rest of the country for a little snack.

Terrorists might kidnap Bob's girlfriend and hold her hostage.

A comet might aim itself right at Vanillaville.

An earthquake, a tornado, a torch-carrying mob from Cinnamontown bent on the destruction of its arch-rival, food-shortages, plague, drought, a million dollars missing from the Library Fund tip jar. You need something that Bob can't ignore – and that no one else with any sense can, either. Something big. Something powerful. Something that will push Bob to be the hero he wants to, but is afraid to, be. That will give him reasons to win people to his side, that will cause him to make powerful enemies, that will change him and everyone around him forever.

In a story with smaller scope, the external conflict can be the IRS taking the hero's mom and dad's house for back taxes, or the school burning down, or the appearance of the rare Yellow-Backed Purple-Butted Bark Chewer in woods that haven't seen one for a century. To the right hero, even that sort of thing could change the world forever.

Your turn.

Hurt Bob. Hit him with something on the outside that smacks him upside the head with a fifty-pound rubber mallet and that says to him, **Go. Go now. Do. Be. Or the dream you hold dear, and everything that hangs on it, will die.**

One external conflict, and what he's going to do about it. And who is going to help him, and who is going to oppose him, and how he's going to overcome his own fears and handicaps, and ...

And there's your book. Or your story. Focus on what Bob wants, what his people want, and what the universe intends to do to him, give him obstacles worth struggling over and let him

struggle with everything in him, losing some and winning some, and you'll never spend another day trying to tug vinyl pants over melting wax legs again.

NOTE: Plotting fiction is the art of telling a story readers step into and live inside and need to see reach a strong ending. Plot is conflict creation... and conflict resolution. If you need help with your plotting, take a look at my Create A Plot Clinic, and learn how to make the story you're writing matter to YOUR readers.

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