

Middles

written by Holly
December 23, 2009
By Holly Lisle

I'm in one right now – a middle, that is. Actually, I'm nearing the end of the middle, which writingwise is the utter worst place in the universe to be.

The loathsome middle in question happens to be in **Curse of the Black Heron**, but it wouldn't matter. I've never met a middle I liked, and if the middle weren't CotBH, it would be something just as bad, or worse.

Writers come in all sorts. There are folks who dread the blank page, and who have an absolute terror of getting the thing started, but once they've been plugging on a bit, they're fine. There are folks who start well, middle well, and hate endings. And then there's my sort – we who start well and end well (or at least enjoy doing our beginnings and endings, which I admit isn't always the same thing) but who do awful things to ourselves in the middle of every book because halfway through, we're certain that whatever magic we once had is gone and that every word that spills from our fingertips onto the keyboard has become total crap.

My problems with middles come from several directions at once and conspire to leave me in a state of siege. First, middles are where my plots start to run amok (Amok, amok, amok!) When I first conceive the idea for a novel, I have the beginning and I have the ending, and I have a vague, fuzzy rope running from the former to the latter that sort of connects. When I start writing, though, the rope suddenly starts twisting itself into Celtic knot designs, with a few sheepshanks and nooses and a Gordian knot or two for variety – and I sometimes can't unravel a thing for days.

Next, new people start showing up and auditioning for parts, tap-dancing across the pages going, “See, and I can sing the **Star-Spangled Banner** and ride a unicycle, too!” And if they tap-dance pretty well and don’t hit too many wrong notes, I tend to hire them – only to be left scratching my head and wondering, “Yes, but what do you have to do with my *plot*?” Medwind Song and Flynn the cat in **Fire in the Mist**, Felara in **Hunting the Corrigan’s Blood**, Earwax in **Sympathy for the Devil**, and Belinda in **When the Bough Breaks** are all characters who just showed up.

My characters keel over and die on me at the damndest times, too. I had no intention of killing off one of the main characters in **The Rose Sea** until the very end, but he did something appallingly stupid, (yet totally within character), and got himself slaughtered in the middle of the book. And I was left wondering how I was supposed to do all those wicked things that he was supposed to have done.

Conversely, people who are plugged into my stories as redshirts in the beam-down party get smart on me and duck when the missiles start flying. And then they start demanding extra lines. Eowlie in **The Rose Sea**, Nokar the Librarian in **Fire in the Mist**, Seven-Fingered Fat Girl and Dog Nose in **Bones of the Past**, and Bytoris Caligro in **Mind of the Magic** should have all died early in their respective books. And yet some of them survived quite a bit longer than I’d intended, dodging bullets and deadly spells and grinning fiendishly at me all the while.

I forget things, too—for example, really neat plot twists I’d planned at the beginning that somehow seemed too obvious to include in the outline. So I go off in a different direction, and when I go back for my first edit, I discover that all my initial clues point in a direction other than the one in which the story eventually goes. So forgetting things means lots of rewriting. On the other hand, my forgetting things also means that the story often becomes multilayered, because it’s frequently easier for me to figure out ways to tie the

beginning of the book to the middle and the end, rather than take out all the stuff that no longer fits. When you read a fairly complex puzzle in one of my stories, you can guess that while I was writing it, I was lo-o-o-o-ost ... and about half the time, you'd be right.

Middles are where I rethink my beginnings and debate the wisdom of my endings, too—so the book feels much more finished to me when I'm just starting it (and still think I know where I'm going) than when I have three hundred or more pages done and am wishing a massacre would make a suitable ending.

So here I am, right at the end of the middle, finally remembering all the things I intended to do at the beginning (but didn't do), with a bunch of tap-dancing clowns singing the **Star-Spangled Banner** and a dancing bear who refuses to eat the clowns (though I wish he would), and my fireworks are exploding in the wrong places and at the wrong times, and I'm on that tightrope that now consists almost entirely of Celtic and Gordian knots, but they're tied around my ankles so that if I cut them I fall and if I don't cut them I'm stuck.

Boy, do I hate middles.

NOTE: Along with all my articles and small classes, I offer a few big classes. If you've dreamed of writing a novel (or novels) but have never made it to the finish line... or even out of the starting gate, take a look at my How to Write a Novel class. It's built to take you from "No Idea where to Start" clear through "I finished! ... and I love what I wrote!"

Contents © Holly Lisle. <https://hollylisle.com> All Rights Reserved