

## **WORKSHOP #1 ON EXCELLENCE IN WRITING FICTION**

**PRESENTED BY**

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### **I. STRUCTURING YOUR NOVEL (BEGINNING, MIDDLE, ENDING)**

1. Many new writers fail to take into consideration the importance of structuring their writing in such a way that makes sense to the reader and the writer. When you understand the structure, you will discover that it is much easier to write a successful novel from that foundation.
2. Structure is what holds the story together. Think of it as you would the frame of a house. You put up the frame first, and then you add other parts and you can deviate and be creative as you want, but it all has to be done within that structure. The beginning, middle and ending of your story are like the big pot for all the other ingredients. Whatever your goal might be, short story, novella, or novel, you still work from the same basic structure.
3. We need structure as writers so our stories will hold together and make sense.
4. We need structure as readers so that we can understand the story we are reading and feel something as a result.
5. Charles Dickens, the 19<sup>th</sup> Century novelist, developed the structure for the contemporary novel.
6. Contemporary structure is a sequence of scenes played out in a story, here and now, as if they were taking place visually in front of the reader. The story is told from the viewpoint of one or multiple characters in a series of scenes.

7. When writing a novel, you should have a series of scenes with each one followed by a sequel. The latter is carried out through action or dialogue. The sequel follows the particular action or dialogue with the individual thinking about what just happened and then coming up with a response to the action. The ability for the novelist to get inside a character's head gives the reader an advantage that doesn't happen in a movie or on television. You know exactly what that person is thinking as a result of what happened in the preceding scene. Remember sequel should always follow a scene.
8. Structure is inseparable from plot.
  - a. Plot is the sequence of events in a story that drives toward answering the major dramatic question. (i.e., does the protagonist reach his/her goal and achieve what he/she set out to do in the beginning). **ALL SUCCESSFUL NOVELS ESTABLISH A GOAL FOR THE PROTAGONIST TO ACHIEVE BY NOVEL'S END.**
9. Essentially structure is about 1) a beginning, 2) a middle, and 3) an ending. Each section has a distinct role in telling a story.
10. Beginning
  - a. The beginning of a story has to accomplish three goals: 1) it has to drop the reader right into the middle of the action, 2) it has to provide all the necessary background information to get the reader up to speed, and 3) it has to establish the major dramatic question to keep the reader's interest.
  - b. Most important to your story's beginning is to make sure it starts at a point of change.
  - c. Something must change or be changing in your main character's life. (i.e., he/she is getting married or getting a divorce, he/she just hit the million dollar lottery, or if you are more morbid, someone important in their life has just died). There are a myriad of changes that people go through on a daily basis, so you have a large laundry list from which to pick. But make sure it is significant enough to make a difference in that person's life.
  - d. With change come new goals that your character sets out to achieve.

- e. Of course if change is critical to your beginning the fact that he/she is changing from something old to something new is also important. So you must provide your reader with some back story about the character's life. The beginning of the story, therefore, has to provide sufficient exposition so that readers will know what is going on and why.
- f. The most important task for the writer is to strike the right balance. The reader doesn't have to know everything about your main character's past right away. You can blend it in as the story develops. But they must have some information in the beginning in order to understand why the change is happening.
- g. Remember too much background slows the story down and can lead to boredom and often times confusion. If that happens your reader is likely to toss your book aside and do something else. Once you lose that initial attention from your reader, it is very difficult to recapture it.
- h. The key is to provide just enough background needed for the time and save the rest for later.
- i. In summation, the successful beginning MUST; 1) Get right into the action, 2) Begin at the point of change, 3) Provide sufficient background that caused the change, but not too much for fear your reader gets bored, 4) Introduce the main character or protagonist, and 5) Pose the central question to be resolved.
- j. Finally, remember that the beginning or first chapter is what will get your reader to continue reading. It is called the HOOK. Make sure you hook your reader in so that they cannot put your book down. You must do something very unique to make sure they don't toss your book aside and pick up another one while deciding what to read.
- k. If you follow these recommendations then you will be off to creating a very successful work and you will be assured that any potential agent will ask for the rest of your manuscript for review and once published the reader will buy your work instead of someone else.
- l. PLEASE REMEMBER, AN AGENT IS ONLY GOING TO READ YOUR FIRST 3 CHAPTERS INITIALLY, WHICH WILL INCLUDE YOUR BEGINNING. MAKE SURE YOU COVER ALL THE STEPS OUTLINED**

**ABOVE SO THAT HE/SHE WILL NOT SEND YOU A REJECTION NOTICE, BUT INSTEAD A REQUEST FOR YOUR ENTIRE MANUSCRIPT.**

11. The Middle

- a. The middle usually takes up the majority of space in your story. This is where most writers will get bogged down. Many writers can get through the beginning, but are not ready for the long haul.
- b. The middle contains additional development of the characters and situations the reader learned about in the beginning. It is also where the core action of the story takes place. Also where the writer will develop sub-plots and additional characters to enhance the reader's interest (to be covered in a later session). This is where the writer creates the bulk of the conflict which is the dynamic driving force behind any novel.
- c. Is where the protagonist's path toward achieving his/her goal meets up with obstacle after obstacle, creating rising conflict. Where the forces working against her/him become ever more powerful with each new scene.
- d. This is where scene and sequel must be perfected. The writer must use cause and effect.
- e. Events in the middle cannot be random happenings. Since fiction is make believe, it has to be more logical than real life if it is to be believable.
- f. To make a story believable there must always be a reason why something happens.
- g. Coincidence is a killer in fiction. A writer who takes the easy road and has things happen based on coincidence, for example have a character be at the right place at the right time, or happen to pick up a phone in the kitchen and over hear their mate making plans to meet someone later that night, your reader will refuse to believe it. You cannot afford to have your reader stop believing because they will then remove themselves from your story and at that point it is dead. In real life coincidence can happen, but not in fiction.
- h. Just remember, the fictional world is CAUSE AND EFFECT. THE MIDDLE OF YOUR STORY SHOULD BE ORDERLY WITH A CHAIN OF**

## CAUSE AND EFFECT EVENTS THAT ULTIMATELY LEAD TO THE ENDING.

### 12. The Ending

- a. "Great is the art of the beginning, but greater is the art of the ending.'
- b. Endings can be very difficult for some writers because the ending must tie all things together.
- c. Ending is probably the shortest section but it has tremendous importance.
- d. The ending generally follows a pattern that is described by the three C's which are crisis, climax, and consequences.
- e. Crisis is the point where the tension is at its maximum. Throughout the middle we have created a number of scenes filled with conflict. Now it has reached the breaking point and we know something is about to give.
- f. Climax is where the crisis breaks and where we finally get the answer to our major dramatic question asked in the beginning.
- g. Consequences are the result of the climax or what happens after the major question has been answered.
- h. Finally, the ending should feel inevitable but unexpected.

These are the basic points needed for building your structure. As you go along other key elements of good writing will be added. You must develop good and likeable characters, a sound plot, great dialogue, lot of action and believable scenes. Most important write a note to yourself that you should have right above your desk where you work is **SHOW DON'T TELL**. Count the number of times that you use the word "was" in your story as an indicator as to whether you are telling or showing. Example, "He was going to the store." As opposed to "He ran to the store," or "He strolled to the store." This is just one example of the trap writers will fall into. Using "was" is often considered a lazy way of writing. Inaction keeps your reader out of the story, and action brings them right into the scene. Remember telling the story is a sure way to get your manuscript rejected by an agent or an editor.

**WHEN YOU BEGIN WRITING YOUR FUTURE MASTERPIECE, PLEASE REMEMBER THESE IMPORTANT POINTS AS AN INITIAL BEGINNING TOWARD YOUR CLIMB TO THE *ESSENCE MAGAZINE* BEST SELLER LIST.**

**A BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR THE AVID WRITER WHO WOULD LOVE TO IMPROVE THEIR CRAFT AS A WRITER!!**

1. Robert C. Meredith and John D. Fitzgerald, *Structuring Your Novel: From Basic Idea to Finished Manuscript*, (Harper Perennial, Division of Harper Collins Publishers)
  - a. The writers take you through the different techniques used by successful novelists. Fourteen elements of structure are covered from conflict through style. In the appendix the authors give a synopsis of common elements of structure.
2. Albert Zuckerman, *Writing the Blockbuster Novel*, (Writers Digest Books)
  - a. A book designed for the author who wants to write a major novel. It covers the following topics; 1) Getting Started, 2) The Big Book, What is it? 3) Setting you novel, 4) The outline process, 5) Larger than life characters, 6) Point of View, 7) Tightening character relationships, 8) Setting up scenes, 9) Big scenes, 10) Weaving plot strands, 11) Rhythm in plot, 12) Story points, 13) Revision, 14) Getting it published and onto the bestseller list.
3. Tom Clark, et. al., *The Writer's Digest Handbook of Novel Writing* (Writer's Digest Books).
  - a. Some of the finest novelists write short essays on creative writing. They discuss everything from how to write believable characters to how to negotiate a contract. Covers the following topics, 1) Writing that book must become the most important thing in your life, by Tom Clancy, 2) Five questions every first novelist must answer, by W.B. Stroyby, 3) Stranger than Truth, by Art Spiko, 4) Ten Essentials of Popular Fiction, by David Groff and includes a practical ten-point checklist of what readers and editors seek from popular novels, 5) What Kind of Story are you telling?, by Orson Scott Card, discusses four factors that are necessary to

- determine the tone of your story; milieu, idea, character, and event, 6) Scene and Sequel: Two Keys to Strong Plot, by Jack Bickham, is a step by step guide to controlling your story's plot, pacing, tension and conflict, 7) Nancy Kress, *Using the Flashback*. Explains how to use flash back or back story without losing the attention of your reader, 8) *How to Write a Bestselling Novel*, by Tom Clancy, identifies the sources of bestselling fiction.
4. James N. Frey, *How to Write a Damn Good Novel*. Written for the beginner or professional novel writers who need a crash course in the down-to-earth basics of story telling. Includes 1) Creating sizzling characters, 2) Developing a compelling premise, 3) Telling a riveting story, 4) Bringing the story to a climax, 5) Resolving the conflict, and 6) Establishing appropriate viewpoint characters.
  5. Jack M. Bickham, *Scene and Structure*. One of the most important works for anyone writing fiction. Explains how to construct fiction with a logical flow of action from scene to scene. In order to comprehend the concept of show don't tell, which is essential to fiction writing, writer must comprehend the art of creating scene/sequel.
  6. Gotham Writers Workshop, *Writing Fiction, A Practical Guide from New York's Acclaimed Creative Writing School*. A number of writing instructors cover the basic elements of writing. Key chapters include: 1) Fiction: The what, how and why, 2) Character: Casting Shadows, 3) Plot: A question of focus, 4) Point of View: The Complete Menu, 5) Description: The picture in words, 6) Dialogue: Talking it up, 7) Voice: The sound of the story, and 8) Theme: What's Your Story Really About?
  7. Jesse Lee Kercheval, *Building Fiction: How to Develop Plot and Structure*. This book looks at novel writing the same way an architect looks at building a house.
  8. Jack Bickham, *The 38 Most Common Fiction Writing Mistakes and How to Avoid Them*. This is a must have book for anyone writing fiction. Bickham identifies the mistakes that writers make, but can easily correct. Every writer should have this book next to their computer as they edit their work.

The errors Bickham identifies are the kind agents look for as justification for returning your work with a very familiar rejection letter.

9. Jewel Parker Rhodes, *Free Within Ourselves: Fiction Lessons for Black Authors*, (Doubleday Books). Consists of creative writing lessons using Black writers as examples. It is a manual for educating, supporting, sustaining the writing process for African American authors. Includes: 1) Getting Ready to Work; Claiming a journal for the writer within, 2) Literary ancestors, 3) Unearthing Tales, 4) How to keep going, 5) Creating Characters, 6) Creating Plot, 7) Point of View, 8) Description, Setting, and Atmosphere, 9) Dialogue, dialect, and narrative voice, 10) Theme. Includes a section titled Best Advice from Black Writers to Black Writers organized around the following common themes, 1) Read, 2) Believe, 3) Love, 4) Pray, 5) Listen, remember, feel, 6) Learn, 7) Work, 8) Rewrite, 9) Grow, 10) Nurture.
  
10. Stephen King, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*. This reads much like a memoir of Stephen King's life. The work is divided into two parts with the first dealing with King's early life and his struggle with alcohol and drugs. The second part gets down toe business of talking about the craft of writing.

My dear friends, I hope this workshop, to include the session on Structuring Your Novel, and also the bibliography have been useful to you. Please let me know what you think. You can reach me at [fredwilliams@satx.rr.com](mailto:fredwilliams@satx.rr.com) Write much and write well.