

The Power of Story: Writing Lessons from the Author of Life

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“The purpose of a storyteller is not to tell you how to think, but to give you questions to think upon.”
–Brandon Sanderson, author

“He was never without a story when he spoke.” –Mark 4:34 MSG

A parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.

There are many debates on what makes the most powerful story—plot, character, or message—but we’re going to look at how to combine all three for the most impact.

Plot Driven:

Plot is a sequence of events that are connected by cause and effect.

When you focus on plot, you focus on events.

Plot-driven stories are often exciting and fast paced. They compel the reader to turn the page to find out how the characters will escape, evade, prevail, or overcome.

As an author of a plot-driven story, you have to meticulously tie together plot points to create a cohesive story. You naturally focus on ideas instead of people and their motivations.

Example: When writing for Love Inspired Suspense, I could not give my heroine the quirk of eating whenever she got nervous because that slowed down the pacing.

Character Driven:

A character is the individual you use to tell your story.

To be successful, your characters should be memorable, dimensional, and distinct from each other. They must have a sense of agency. In other words, your characters should own and control their actions within the world that you create.

A character-driven story is one focused on studying the characters that make up your story. Character-driven stories can deal with inner transformation or the relationships between the characters.

Example: In my very first novel, an editor said that my characters were good enough for a plot driven novel but because it was character-driven, I needed to flesh them out more.

Message Driven:

Christian readers anticipate and “look for” specific messages far more than general market readers anticipate and “look for” specific messages. These can be very powerful, but...

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We are less critical of message-driven fiction when we agree with the message, which can weaken the message or allow it to come across as heavy-handed, and thus will only “preach to the choir.”

Example: The Winnie the Pooh Safety Rules special my mom made me watch as a kid.

The greatest stories combine plot, character, and message in an organic way so that they all depend on and empower each other.



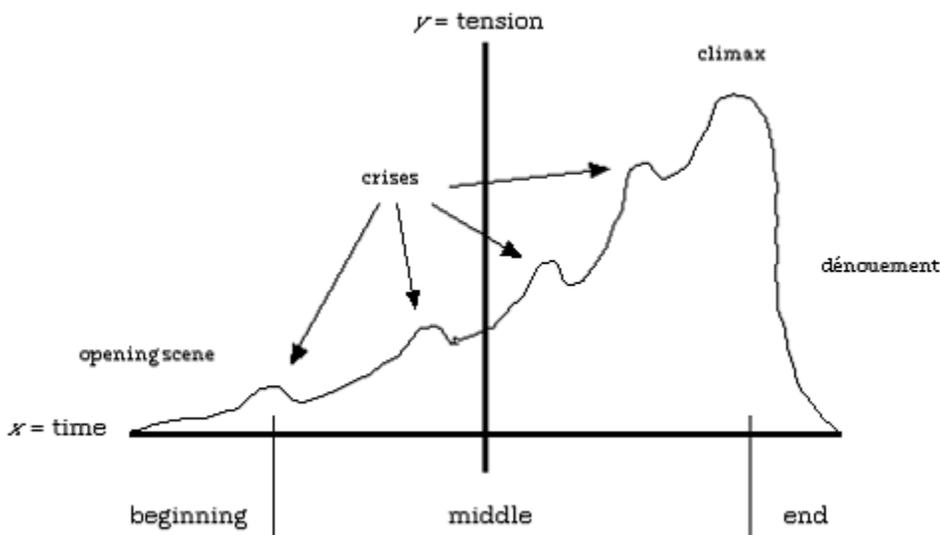
Screenwriters break this up by blocking 9-10 scenes in each of these sections, so that at the end of the first 9 scenes, the character makes a choice that takes him past the point of no return at the **inciting incident**.

After the next nine scenes, you're at the **midpoint**, where it looks like they've achieved their goal.

But then things take a nosedive in the next nine scenes (they probably unwittingly made their situation even worse) until all hope seems lost at the **black moment**.

The **climax** is where the hero overcomes.

Novelists have a little more leeway.



You combine your plot and character by making the inciting incident and climax very specific to the hero you create. They have a strength that is also their weakness. This is what gets them into trouble in the beginning, but it's also what helps them overcome in the end.

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The inciting incident and black moments are opposite sides of a coin that only they can flip.

Example: Joseph's dreams, Luke Skywalker's heritage, Lightning McQueen's driving skills

Characters naturally want to take the path of least resistance. They don't initially go off to battle or profess their undying devotion. They take the easiest step toward their goal, and as the author, your job is to block that goal, so they have to keep taking bigger and riskier steps.

My character wants _____ but, _____ therefore, _____.

Character wants = Goal

But = Obstacle

Therefore = Conflict

The darker your black moment the more powerful their story of overcoming.

Your message is in the black moment. Your message must overcome the most powerful argument against it.

You can't ignore the legitimate arguments of the other side. Life is hard and messy, and to wave off the struggles of humanity does not share the hope of Christ. You can't simply give an adulterer AIDS or kill an atheist in a car wreck. That's where stories get preachy.

It must look like the other side is going to win. For example, the husband is going to lose his wife in childbirth because she refused to terminate an at-risk pregnancy. Will he choose her life or the life of their unborn child?

You, as the author, have prepared the character you created for the obstacles you've given them much like the Author of Life has prepared you.

"The hero and the villain are both wounded. The villain hides their wounds with evil. The hero finds healing through self-sacrifice." —How to Write a D@mn Good Suspense Novel

The End

Tie it together. Condense. Every word counts. See if you can bring the story full circle with irony.

The Nose Plays (Taken from Matt Damon's fake nose in *Oceans 13*)—Even the stuff that didn't matter turns out to matter. If you get lost, look back at what you've already written to find your direction. Even a plot twist comes organically. The writer of *The Sixth Sense* didn't know Bruce Willis's character was dead until the 5th revision.

"A good book has no ending." —R.D. Cumming