

To Plot or Not to Plot

By

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When the Highlights Foundation emailed me with requested assignments for the workshops I was to teach, telling me that one of them was to be on plot, I pushed my chair back from my desk and laughed. Plot is probably the most difficult part of writing for me! Some writers love to plot. Me? Give me the safe confines of endless revision any day. Plot can make me gnash my teeth and yell at the furniture. But then I remembered what my favorite hockey player, Derek Sanderson of the Boston Bruins, said long ago when he was Rookie of the year: “Work on the tough stuff.” So I immediately emailed back and said SURE!

It took me years to come up with the plot for *Moose Eggs*. One day when working on a revision of *Sarey by Lantern Light* for Down East Books, my editor, Karin Wormer asked if I had ever outlined the plot. Fortunately we were talking on the telephone so she didn't see my face turn red. For *Wind Rider*, I tried very hard to outline my plot, but when it came to the ending I got stuck. I contemplated that wretched plot during my daily walks. That worked for *Moose Eggs*. I mulled it over every night as I fell asleep. That worked for *Sarey*. I ruminated on it during library board meetings when I was supposed to be helping decide what flavors of homemade ice-cream to make for our annual ice-cream social. That didn't help anything. What finally worked? Sitting down at the keyboard and literally putting one word ahead of the other. I knew basically where I wanted my story to end up, but I didn't know how it was going to get there. Now imagine my shock when readers tell me that the ending of *Wind Rider* is their favorite part! (Being surprised yourself is a great way to come up with an unexpected ending!)

Some writers say “Plot is just one damn thing after another.” Some say never worry about plot until your second draft. Just get a rotten first draft down, find out who the characters and events are, have them make mistakes and take action based on those mistakes, and have your main character *learn*. Then craft your plot, make it structured, well balanced, and make it mean something in the second draft. Here's what Stephen King has to say about plot in his wonderful book, *On Writing*:

“I won't try to convince you that I've never plotted any more than I'd try to convince you that I've never told a lie, but I do both as infrequently as possible . . . I want to put a group of characters (perhaps a pair; perhaps even just one) in some sort of predicament and then watch them try to work themselves free. My job isn't to *help* them work their way free, or manipulate them to safety—those are jobs which require the noisy jackhammer of plot—but to watch what happens and then write it down.

The situation comes first. The characters—always flat and unfeatured, to begin with—come next. Once these things are fixed in my mind, I begin to narrate. I often have an idea of what the outcome may be, but I have never

demanded of a set of characters that they do things my way. On the contrary, I want them to do things their way. In some instances, the outcome is what I visualized. In most, however, it's something I never expected."

On the other hand, here's what Kathryn Jensen Pearce, author of 35 novels for young people has to say:

"Yes, there are a few published writers who declare to interviewers that they never work from outlines and simply let the writing flow. I believe this is rarely a successful method. Most authors I know outline in detail before they begin writing. Jotting down even a brief overview of your story gives you a valuable tool and won't detract from the excitement of actually writing the scenes. I don't use dialog at all in my outlines for just this reason. And I always use present tense in my plotting notes, so that when I shift to past tense for my story, the prose will feel fresh and new to me."

Being a Libra, I guess my own outlook is a balance of these two extremes. When I take my *Writer's Tool Box* to classrooms and talk about plot with kids, I ask them if anyone has a family member who builds houses. Usually several hands fly into the air. Then I ask what that person needs to build that house before the lumber, nails, and roofing is delivered, before the cinder blocks arrive, before the backhoe rattles in to excavate the cellar hole. At this point some brilliant young person usually shouts out, "A blueprint!" and he/she is, of course, exactly right. I then tell the kids that they too, need a blueprint, or a plan, or a *plot* for their story. Next, I terrorized them by unfolding a huge, magnificent, highly detailed blueprint of the New York State Police Barracks that that my bother-in-law, John Hall, who was project manager gave me. At this point, if there are any would-be writers in the audience who haven't fainted in horror, I revive them with Joseph Campbell's summary of the universal story:

A hero—**who wants something**—goes out into the world. He/she meets with an obstacle. Something happens. **The hero is changed** (hopefully for the better).

Bruce Coville says, "Take someone you like and get him into trouble—but he must solve the problem by himself in the end."

That's it. End of story. At the minimum, all you need. So try it anyway you like—complex, organized, impromptu, exploratory—but keep a few things in mind. Most plotting evolves from a situation: Father Moose wants a baby moose. A little girl with dyslexia is humiliated in reading class. A kid from a hunter-gather tribe in prehistoric Asia finds a young horse trapped in a bog.

Next comes character: a good hearted, gullible moose; a sensitive, artistically talented child; a courageous and stubborn girl who has a special affinity for animals.

Now we start throwing in obstacles: Moose has a misguided friend, Grouse. Sarey decides not to read. Fern can't bear to tell her people that she has found an easy prey.

How will your character(s) respond? For more sophisticated readers you can weave subplots for equal or lesser characters, but for younger kids it's usually best to keep to one story.

Don't stop there. Often we use the old magical "rule of three." Upping the stakes twice, or tossing two obstacles into the hero's path aren't usually enough to make the ending worthwhile, and four crises are usually too exhausting. Three obstacles of increasing perplexity usually feel right. You can relieve your readers with interludes of calm, but your story should build toward:

THE THUNDERSTORM—the climax or catharsis of all the problems in your hero's journey. Nancy Kress, author of many science fiction and fantasy books, and who gave a wonderful workshop on plot for the Rochester Area Children's Writers and Illustrators last winter, says "this should purge emotions and give a renewed sense of appreciation for life." This is the turning point, the moment in time when your character undergoes that crucial change, the tempering of the steel of character.

Your ending, the traditional denouement, should not and need not be lengthy except in longer works where there are lots of subplots to pull together. It doesn't have to be fairytale happy, but should resolve the tensions you've built in up and leave readers with a feeling of completeness and satisfaction. Often it's effective to return to the first situation to fully illustrate the change in your protagonist, for most of all, that protagonist with the deep yearning must have undergone a leapt in personal growth.

Here are the basics of plot that Nancy Kress had us think about. As an exercise, think about a work in progress of your own and see if you can answer all of these questions in **250 words** as if it were flap copy for your book (remembering that flap copy doesn't give away the ending).