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Writing Action Fiction

by DESMOND BAGLEY

IF BEING in the mainstream of a tradition that goes back thousands of years is considered old-fashioned, then I must confess that I am indeed a square fellow, because I consider myself to be first, last, and always a storyteller. I am old-fashioned enough to

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believe that a story should have a beginning, a middle, and an end.

The telling of stories probably began back in the caves when Ug, his belly comfortably full of meat, said, "Glug, tell us a story."

Glug considered for a while, and then began, "Well, once upon a time . . ."

Glug's stories would often, but not invariably, end: "And they all lived happily ever after." Thus we have a beginning and an end, and stuck in the middle there is, of course, the middle.

Three-part structure

It is no accident that the classic drama developed a three-act structure. Act I displays to us the characters and the situation in which they find themselves, tells us who they are, their relationship to each other, what they are doing and where they are doing it. Act II develops and complicates the opening situation in various interesting ways. The author of the drama seems to be painting himself into a corner, and our attention is held by figuring

how he intends to get himself out. Act III is the denouement; all the complications and problems inherent in the opening situation, and magnified in the development, are solved.

This three-part structure may be seen in the sonata form of the first movement of a classical symphony. It is also to be seen in chess, where there is the opening, the middle game and the end game, each requiring its own form of play. The three-part structure itself seems to be psychologically satisfying.

The cardinal tenet in all fiction writing is that characterization is more important than plot. This may seem an odd statement coming from a writer of action fiction, a genre in which strong plotting is considered to be the prime necessity. Nevertheless it is true. There are no original plots; Shakespeare mined his stories from Holinshed's *Chronicles*, and *West Side Story* was a retelling of *Romeo and Juliet*.

Because a novel is primarily about people it stands or falls by its characterization. The dream folk who populate the pages of your book must be human beings with past histories and hopes for the future. Even though the previous life of even a minor character is never referred to in the book it must be present in the writer's mind so that he is able to regard his creation, and so to present him, as a rounded human being. I think it was in this connection that Hemingway once remarked, "What you leave out of a book is more important than what you put in."

I choose a background that is interesting to me personally and, if possible, I do my research on location as I did when I went to Iceland to research my novel *Running Blind*. I treat the background as a character in its own right. This, to me, is most important. The plot that was worked out in *Running Blind* came directly from the terrain and the peculiar social institutions of Iceland, and I do not think that specific plot could have been set in any other country. This tends to give the story a free-flowing spontaneity that is hard to achieve otherwise.

So I have a group of interesting people set in an interesting landscape. I have no plot. This is not to say that I do not have a theme, which must not be confused with plot, although it often is. The theme of *Running Blind* was the sheer damned stupidity of

international espionage; the theme of *Landslide* was the search for personal identity; that of *The Vivero Letter* was of the danger of using vanity to cure a punctured ego.

The theme, then, is the core of the book — it is what you want to say — and out of the interaction of the characters, the environment, and the theme comes the plot. I know how the book starts because I have already set up the initial situation, and I know, rather vaguely, how I would like it to end. Between beginning and end there are 250 sheets of blank paper — the all-important middle.

Cliff-hanging for writer and reader

The only time I wrote the synopsis of a book before attacking the typewriter was the time the book never got written. When I finished the synopsis, my unconscious mind must have decided that I had finished the book, and I lost interest. So in the day-to-day writing I never know what I am going to put on paper next. My wife, who reads my work as a nightly cliff-hanger, often asks, "What is going to happen now?" My invariable answer is a shrug and, "Damned if I know. I'll find out tomorrow."

This way of writing is, at least, a prophylactic against *telegraphing* — against letting the reader figure out, in reading Chapter Two, what is going to happen in Chapter Six. In the writing of action fiction this is a mortal sin, but if I don't know what I'm going to write tomorrow, how the devil is the reader expected to guess? And, again, it helps spontaneity.

When a potential reader enters a bookstore or a library he will take down a book, glance at the blurb, and then inspect the first page. It is here we find the writer's main problem — how to get the reader to turn that page. And not only that page but the next page and the next until he has come to the end of the book.

This ability to grab the reader's attention is a flair which some writers possess naturally. Dickens certainly had it. How else can you explain the thousands of people who crowded the New York docks awaiting the next issue of *Household Words* so they could find out just what had happened to Little Nell? A flair it may be, but a little thought can find an underlying technique.

I characterize this as the *hook*. On that first page a character must do or say something, or the opening situation must be such that the reader is impelled to ask himself, "What happens next?" You have planted a hook. It may not be removed until page 20 or page 192, when that particular situation is resolved, but before then, another hook must be planted, and so right through the book. There must always be at least one — and preferably more — hooks to catch the reader's attention.

A single example should suffice. On the first page of *Running Blind*, the first-person narrator is shown standing on a lonely road in Iceland, a corpse at his feet, a blood-stained knife in his hand, and admitting that he has deprived a person of life.

There is not just one hook here, but many. To begin with, by the conventions of the action fiction genre, any first-person narrator is automatically the hero, and heroes don't go around slaughtering people indiscriminately — at least, mine don't. So the reader immediately asks, "How come?"

Since the narrator is apprehensive about the possible approach of a car, the reader asks, "What's going to happen to the body?" Then he also asks, "How did it happen?" and, again, "Why did it happen?" Four barbed hooks in the reader's imagination, and the reader must turn that page to get the answers.

Because I write action fiction, the hooks in this example tend to be bloody, but in *any* kind of fiction if no hooks are jabbed into the reader's imagination and if the reader is presented with an uninteresting first page, that page will not be turned and, as a writer, you are dead.

You may have noticed that in the above example the book has started *in medias res* — in the middle of the action. You don't *have* to start at the beginning because you can always cover that by a flashback. Using flashbacks is not recommended for the beginning writer because it is fraught with technical difficulties mostly concerned with maintaining tension.

Good versus evil

What about plot? Where does it come from?

The answer to that is simple. If you choose your characters carefully, then the opening

situation will have built-in tensions, and the whole aim of the book is to relieve these tensions. While the action novel may be simplistic, the underlying philosophy is of graver moment and is nothing less than the eternal battle of good against evil. If, as usually happens, good wins out, then the tensions are relieved. It is worth pointing out, however, that the tensions are also relieved if evil wins.

So the plot grows from the initial situation in an organic way. The characters interact with each other and are constrained by the environment in which the action takes place. The unfolding plot must be strictly in keeping with the motivations of the characters and the premises inherent in the opening situation, which is another reason why I do not favor the writing of a synopsis. All too often, a character is called upon to behave in a way called for by the synopsis which is not in line with the way he has developed in the book, and the reader immediately says, "But he wouldn't do that!"

When that happens you break the magic spell of the willing suspension of disbelief, disillusion sets in because the reader believes himself to have been cheated, and the book is tossed aside unread.

I do not think that in the writing of action fiction there need be any strict adherence to real-life probability. Plausibility is enough, provided that the premises of the opening situation and the integrity of the characters as you have drawn them are not violated. To paraphrase Shakespeare: "To thine own characters be true, and then thou canst not be false to any reader."

And when all is done and you come to the end, you will find to your surprise that you have a pretty taut and well-plotted book, the better written because the action has derived entirely from the natural drives of the characters and has not been imposed as a pre-conceived and somewhat artificial schema.

These are *personal* notes on writing action fiction. The examples are from my own books because I know them best and because I know just why I have used one technique in one book and a different technique in another. Again, my method of writing may appear to be idiosyncratic in the extreme. All writers differ in the way they write and though my way may be peculiar, it works for me.