

8. SOME BASIC PLOT ELEMENTS

In last month's article, I spoke about the basic problem which lies at the heart of every plot ie something is wrong and it's affecting our main protagonist/s. If you haven't read that article, you might like to read it first.

There are various plot elements to be taken into consideration when telling your story. Characters are an extremely important one, but this series of articles does not focus on characterisation. Other elements more relevant to plotting and editing are discussed in this series: problems/conflict, time, structure, layering, tension, resolution being just a few of them.

1. TIME

This is a major plotting element. We do not usually start a novel with the big plot crisis and its resolution. We normally build up gradually to that. But we do usually start with a problem of some sort for the hero or heroine, or a turning point in their lives that poses intriguing questions for the reader.

As time passes and the story progresses, we escalate the problem/s, or add new ones. My favourite 'rule' for writing is still to put one's heroine up a tree and throw stones at her - or do the same to one's hero! But you don't throw all the stones at once. You spread them out over time - and therefore over the length of the story.

2. LAYERS

The best novels often have several layers of problems that the protagonists must overcome to reach a happy, or at least a satisfactory ending - whatever suits the story and genre. The stories start with one problem and build up to another, reveal something else, leading you into another crisis.

In my novel JESSIE (set in the late 1830s, early 1840s) the heroine desperately wants more than a life as a maid in a large house. She gets her wish, at a cost and after a struggle, but that brings other problems which affect her personal safety, her relationship with the hero and even her friends' lives. And these complications pile up into a big climax before they gentle down into a happy ending. *(I have to confess that my books always have happy endings because I get to choose and I vote for happiness every time - after it's been earned!)*

These plot layers should include surprises, twists, turns and revelations that are unexpected - and are well timed. You may have to change things, reposition scenes, add new elements in order to get the plot depth and interest into your final version. That's all part of the craft of writing.

HERRINGBONE OR LINEAR APPROACHES

You can use various styles of plot structure to carry your story, and indeed, your choice gives you another plot element - and not an insignificant one.

In a linear style, the story follows the main protagonist from start to finish. This style suits shorter novels, but can also be used for longer ones.

In a herringbone style of plot, there are two, often more, groups of players involved. This type of plot needs a longer book to do it justice. The various sub-plots and characters might not even seem to be connected at the beginning of the story, but by the end they are well and truly linked.

One of the best herringbone plots I ever read was Maeve Binchy's 'The Evening Class'. I would thoroughly recommend it for study. Or you could read some of my Anna Jacobs books, most of which use that technique as well. The first chapters of my published books are all on my web site

(<http://www.annajacobs.com>) and you can see there the introduction of several elements which will gradually come together.

You can also develop plots which are combinations of the two styles. I did that in SEASONS OF LOVE (Severn House, UK, coming in December 2000) which follows the heroine as she moves through three relationships - a youthful error, an older friend/husband, and the romantic love of her life. I didn't know the conventions for writing romances when I first dreamed up this story (ie it should be about one man and one woman) and I had not studied plotting techniques - it just seemed best for this particular story so I sat down and wrote it over several months. It got rejected the first time out, by the way, but I rewrote it several years later with (ahem!) my maturer skills and then it was accepted.

There is nothing 'right' or 'wrong' about either of these plot styles and of course, the two I've mentioned are not the only styles or structures available to the writer. I'm using them as examples and it's simply a matter of choice which style/structure is used to carry the story.

For those of you not yet published, it might be a good exercise to try writing books of different plot types, to see which feels more comfortable. You may surprise yourself. You'll definitely learn something.

Next month's article will focus on tension and endings.