

TELL ME A STORY! (A really good one)

by Sherry-Anne Jacobs

© 2001 Sherry-Anne Jacobs. This article is copyright. You may make a single copy of it for your own use. No other use may be made of this article without the author's permission. (jacobses@inet.net.au)

INTRODUCTION

There are so many elements involved in writing novels that it's no wonder those on the publication trail sometimes get bogged down in the details of writing. And of course, details are important, part of the overall striving for professionalism and excellence. But I sometimes wonder whether less experienced writers lose the plot - quite literally - and start fiddling with details too soon.

In my opinion, what sells a manuscript to a publisher is the story - first, second and third! If you haven't got a good story, then you haven't got a sale.

As part of a story, you will of course need to create particularly vivid characters that suit your genre. Your reader must be able to relate to them in some way and they must have strong emotions and serious problems to solve. Whole books are written about developing characters and I'm not going to try to sum the art up in a brief aside.

So OK, you've got some fascinating characters and you've got your basic plot idea - where do you go from there in order to produce a saleable manuscript? Well, I'd like to offer you a four-step approach.

1. GET THE STORY WORKED OUT AND WRITTEN

It doesn't matter at this stage whether you plot in detail before you start writing, or whether you develop a rough idea and then work out the details of the story as you go. Either approach is quite valid. It's a personal choice and it's the final product that counts, not how you get there. My main advice is not to expect perfection the first time through. Just get the story worked out and written down. I call this my dirty first draft.

2. STUDY THE BASIC PLOT

Give yourself time off to distance yourself from your writing - at least a week, preferably a month (yes, really!) - then go back through your story. The main question you're asking at this time is this: *is there enough action to keep the story exciting?* You'll need twists, changes, surprises, and even withholding information. That is, you need action, not fancy words.

Maybe, if you're less experienced, you'll need to wait again and then repeat this stage. Don't - DO NOT! - I mean it, now! - go on to the next stage until you're sure you've got the skeleton plot fleshed out with adequate and credible action. And don't, for heaven's sake, start fiddling with grammar and vocabulary at this stage, thinking that will make a big difference. It won't. Not yet, anyway. Oh, I know you can't help changing the odd word here and there as you go through it, but do not set out to work specifically on the details till you've got your action threads right.

3. ENHANCE EACH SCENE

Give yourself another break from the manuscript so that you can judge it more objectively (stop groaning and just do it!) then go back and really work on enhancing each scene. You've got your story in place. You've checked that there's enough going on. Now, start enhancing each scene. Add new depth, smarten up the dialogue, add a bit of description, increase the excitement, fire up a sexual encounter, deepen the tension/suspense, plant a clue about a future event - whatever is expected in your chosen genre.

You may need to repeat this action enhancement stage, too. You must do whatever it takes to, given your stage of development as a writer, to

- A. learn your craft, and
- B. make this manuscript saleable.

Don't grudge the extra time and effort. It may make a huge difference.

4. OK, NOW YOU CAN START FIDDLING

This is the last stage. Not until the story is firmly in place and each action well portrayed do you need to work hard on your editing of details, for the obvious reason that if you have to cut out a scene, you'll have wasted your time polishing it. But now you can look at individual words, trying to find better ones, avoiding repetition, cutting out clichés and tired phrases, making your dialogue sparkle, getting the punctuation and grammar right

After that, give yourself a pat on the back for effort.

FINALLY . . .

Always remember:

It isn't details of vocabulary and punctuation which sell a manuscript, it's the quality of your story and character interactions.

So the moral is: slow down on your submitting, slow down on your editorial fiddling, and bring all your wonderful creativity to bear on the actions and interactions of your characters. Please - tell me a really *good* story, make me unable to put the book down until I find out what happens.

PS I've written a whole book about Plotting and Editing. See my web site for details. My agent (who is also a top editor) says the book contains exactly what he'd like to tell the many people who send him manuscripts and who can write, but who are 'not there yet'. But of course he doesn't have the time to do that. The book is available as a paperback from the Australian Online Bookshop (<http://www.bookworm.com.au>) or electronically from Fiction Works (<http://www.fictionworks.com>).