

ACFW Online Class "Planning a Book"
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LESSON #1

Have you ever hit a writing roadblock so huge, so discouraging that it sent you into a tailspin of despair?

I'd been blessed with six years of easy sailing. When I talked last time about rejections being a blessing, my early rejections certainly were, because they led me to a wonderful, encouraging and supportive editor who would ask for my next proposals before I finished my current contracts, and who taught me so much. But then--the direction of the line shifted, and my next trilogy proposal was flatly rejected. My muse skedaddled, leaving me struggling to write, and I was filled with self-doubt.

Have you faced any rejections yet? Well, published authors do, too. Never a happy moment for anyone, but when things go south, it can be a perfect impetus for change that can lead us in new and exciting directions. I know of people who were told outright that the editor didn't want any more books from them. Ever. Sometimes tactfully, and sometimes not. How the writers responded to this challenge made all the difference.

Some threw in the towel completely. Others took a hard look at their goals, re-invented themselves, and struck out for new horizons. And often, there was a wonderfully happy ending!

One friend had a trilogy rejected by her editor at Harlequin. She'd just quit her day job to write, and it was a huge blow. But she settled down and showed her gumption when she re-wrote that proposal and sold it as a single title suspense series to a different house. She ended up on the New York Times bestseller list with it...where she has stayed ever since, with all of her other suspense novels. Other friends soldiered on as well, sold to different publishers, and found themselves feeling revitalized by a fresh new direction.

After hitting my own rejection roadblock, I did sell several more books to my old line, but the experience was still a good wake-up call. I took a hard look at my writing process, and worked on trying to improve. And I spent a lot of time talking to a dear friend and fellow author, who encouraged me to move into inspirational, and this brought me to a place where I am really happy. In the process of changing, I ended up with deadlines for five books in twelve months at the same time we were in the midst of remodeling our house, our daughter was graduating from high school, and we had travel plans. Before that, I'd been accustomed to writing an average of 2.5 books a year. Believe me, I was truly grateful for the blessing of those sales...but I was also very busy!

Now, I know there are very fast writers out there. Some of you may write like the wind. But suddenly trying to be twice as productive was a little mind-boggling! And not only are there manuscripts to finish when you make a sale, but there are also the deadlines for revisions, line edits, and copy edits that come popping up along the way for each book. Time was short, and my confidence was still really shaky. I second-guessed every word as I stared at the blank monitor screen, afraid that I had lost my ability to even write a first chapter. I had to stop and try to analyze how to write a book, when before it had become instinctive.

What I'm going to share with you is what I learned--one way to approach planning a book, how to write it efficiently, and how to track what you've done, so you can get to The End with a cohesive project and have an easier time with any needed revisions. Pre-planning can make all the difference in the amount of re-writing and revision you might face later.

I attended a workshop given by a very wonderful, very successful secular author who said she writes her first draft way over-long, and then ends up discarding a good 30,000 words of her first draft during her multi-phase re-writing process. I sure can't argue with her success. But if one is a bit more efficient in the first place, instead of throwing all of those words away, then that extra time could be spent on the next book!

Unpublished "seat of the pants writers" don't feel comfortable planning ahead. I totally understand that everyone works differently. And before you are published, anything goes. Selling a first book almost always requires a complete manuscript, and you can even write that pesky synopsis afterward, if need be.

But after the first sale, things change. Until you are well-established, it isn't likely that your editors will buy on a mere concept. You'll be needing to write a detailed synopsis and sample chapters to make your sales. "Seat of the pants" or not, this does involve planning! But planning doesn't have to mean setting in stone every single chapter and scene ahead of time. Once you bring characters to life, a story becomes organic--the characters begin acting the way they should, based on their personalities, past experiences and current interactions, and new plot twists can arise that you might not have considered at the start. In Operation: Katie, I had no idea that the main climactic event would totally change when I got there--but suddenly it was just there on the page, and it worked better than what I'd envisioned earlier.

So...here we go with STEP ONE: Where do you start, on your journey toward a cohesive and sellable story?

There is no single right or wrong way. Ask most writers, and they will say they use a consistent starting point each time they start a book.

1. Some start with a general plot idea, as in "I want to write a book about a young woman during the Gold Rush"
2. Some with the vision of an exciting crisis situation or satisfying denouement.
3. Some like to start with an intriguing character or conflict
4. Some with a specific setting

I usually start with setting. Why? Because I'll essentially be "living there" for the months it takes to write a book. I want to use areas that intrigue me...places that might intrigue readers. Places that will lend themselves to the kinds of stories I want to write. To that end, I have often used places like Colorado, Montana, Wyoming, Texas, the lush, beautiful northwoods of Minnesota and Wisconsin, and the Enchanted Circle area of New Mexico.

Choosing the right setting for your story can make all the difference. An urban setting is worlds apart from a folksy, middle-of-America small town where everyone knows everyone else's business. Think about the socio-economic mix in a breezy, upscale California coastal town filled with art galleries and trendy restaurants versus a remote fishing community along the coast of northern Maine. How might those two different settings affect a suspense story? Or a romance?

How differently would your suspense play out in the bitter cold of a remote, vacant resort in northern Minnesota during the dead of winter, where the sheriff might be an hour away, the electricity is flickering and the winter winds are relentlessly howling, rattling the windows; versus a sunny, lazy retirement community in Florida where the heroine senses danger is afoot?

The seasons, weather, and the "personality" of the geographical area you choose can provide a rich fabric of background characters and activities, and even become a character itself. Sandra Brown's secular book *Slow Heat in Heaven* is a wonderful example.

How do the settings in one of Jan Karon's Mitford books affect her stories, as compared to the way setting affects Colleen Coble's *Black Sands*, *Alaska Twilight*, or *Abomination*? Could the Mitford and Coble settings be switched and yield the same affect?

CHARACTERS

Once I've got my setting, I start thinking about what sort of characters might have a good, automatic conflict within that setting. Someone who really wants to leave, but is trapped by circumstances? Someone who has just arrived and is a fish out of water? Someone with a goal that will be nearly impossible to achieve there, or who has some other difficult situation to face? Someone facing family problems or their own troubled past in their home town? Is this person completely unprepared to face a bitter cold northern Canadian winter? Overwhelmed by the heat and humidity of the South in summer?

People will ask if you base your characters on your friends or relatives, but it's not as easy as simply plucking personalities from your daily life. Real life is hardly the stuff of compelling fiction.

In James Scott Bell's wonderful book, *PLOT AND STRUCTURE* (which I highly recommend), he tells us that a reader needs to bond with your main character. You make this happen through emotion--by creating compelling, sympathetic characters facing conflict and struggle.

So...how do you come up with these believable, strong fictional characters? You can dream them up entirely. Concoct a blend of characteristics from various intriguing people--like your Great Aunt Martha and Hilary Clinton and a favorite Sunday School teacher. You can pluck ideas from news and magazine articles. Books on personality typing can be a wonderful resource.

Here are some of my favorites:

TYPE TALK by Otto Kroeger and Janet Thuesen: My copy of *Type Talk* is filled with sticky notes and highlighting!

THE COMPLETE WRITER'S GUIDE TO HEROES & HEROINES by Cowden, Vidars, and LaFever, which gives wonderful information on sixteen master archetypes, and I highly recommend this book as well. It's a great reference for creating believable characters, and for pitting them against other strong, naturally conflicting character types.

LIFE TYPES by Sandra Hirsh and Jean Kummerow

There are many books available on the enneagram theory of personality typing. One is *THE ENNEAGRAM MADE EASY*, by Baron & Wagele.

Books on personality differences based on horoscopes are another resource. I don't believe in horoscopes, but some of these books can provide great characterization ideas, because they go into great detail about different personalities and how they blend or clash with each other. Some examples: *SUN SIGN PERSONALITY GUIDE*, by MacNaughton and *THE PERSONALITY COMPASS*, by Diane Turner and Thelma Greco.

Browse the self-help and psychology section of your local bookstore for other references.

Characterization goes beyond basic personality. Our lives shape us, and this background can provide rich detail for your characters.

What is your character's greatest weakness? Greatest fear?

A perfect, beautiful character might make a great Barbi doll, but not make a great heroine. Susan Elizabeth Phillips has written some wonderful heroines who start out as unlikable. She once said that

one of her characters was so awful in the beginning that readers continued reading the book because they couldn't believe she was even redeemable...though Phillips also handled that arc with a lot of humor to keep people reading.

But...going that far is risky for most of us. How many of us have put a book down because the characters were so unsympathetic, or were "too stupid to live?!"

None of us want to identify with a weak, whiny, ineffectual hero or heroine, but even the strongest of us (and our characters) have inner wounds, fears, needs. At the climax action scene--having the hero face his or her greatest fear adds depth, and illustrates the overwhelming lengths to which the character is willing to go to finally achieve his goal. It can be easy to accomplish, or that character won't appear heroic or worthy

An interesting character has some quirks. Something unexpected. A cliched character has predictable traits. A gentle, sweet teacher. An honorable, donut eating cop. A lean, cowboy who knows livestock but wouldn't be at home in New York.

You need STRONG, interesting main characters with an unexpected twist that makes them unique and memorable. Remember Hannibal Lector? What made him unique and memorable, and not just a two-dimensional, cardboard villain?

Try to determine a set of four or five clear traits for each of your main characters. Then add another that is completely unexpected and surprising. Post the list above your computer to keep on track with these personalities and you'll have consistent characterizations.

Can these traits change? Absolutely! This is called a character arc. I love the old movie *Romancing the Stone*. Did Kathleen Turner remain the same from beginning to end? Definitely not. In the beginning, she wrote about love and adventure but was afraid to experience them both. In the end, she'd faced adventures beyond her imagination and had become a strong, take-charge woman. The movie gave her a great character arc of growth and change.

In contests, you might see a comment like "unbelievable" or "inconsistent" character, or "this character just doesn't work." How can this be?

Well, our characters have personalities, situations, back stories and environments that make them real. When this happens, they almost take on a life of their own--with plausible actions, reactions, and feelings. It's a strange thing we writers do--we make up whole worlds in our heads. We create characters. So surely, then we should be able to make them do or say what is convenient for the story, right? But its not true. Once we create them and make them truly real (and that happens unless a writer just uses cardboard stereotypes), they come to have their own personalities, with backgrounds and moral codes and goals and foibles and strengths, all of which govern what they will or will not do. Just like us. And if the author "forces" them to do or say something as convenience to the author, it may be seen as a jarring inconsistency to a reader.

You need strong characters with INNER CONFLICTS that keep them from fully realizing their own potential. These conflicts stem from emotional wounds and barriers that existed long before this story--perhaps they go all the way back to childhood, though the character has managed to compensate...until this situation upsets his status quo. In a romance, they need a strong, believable conflict that prevents them from being able to easily fall in love and live happily ever after, or your story will end in Chapter Two.

You need them in a situation with strong, believable EXTERNAL conflicts, too--roadblocks to their external, tangible goal--whether its to save the farm, defeat the enemy, track down the killer, or survive the blizzard and still make it to the bank in time to pay off the mortgage. Dealing with these external conflicts also helps the characters begin to change and grow, and finally overcome the inner barriers that have been holding them back.

If you've got a setting, your characters, and an idea of your conflicts, a "FIRST PERSON BIO" is great tool for getting to know those characters much, much better. You've all heard about this, I'm sure, but to someone who isn't a writer, the concept might seem a little strange! It basically involves sitting down at the computer, immersing yourself in the character you have created, and letting a character "channel" his thoughts through you.

Rest your hands on the keyboard. Think about everything you have made him to be. Immerse your thoughts in him. And then, start typing in first person point of view ("I can't believe I let things get to this point. What made me think...") and let the words flow, based on what you already know. His goals. His inner wounds. His thoughts about the situation he's in. His feelings about things like his childhood. The past. His family. His dreams, pain, loss. What makes him the most angry, the most sad. His biggest fear. A page or two of this will be a treasure house of detail that can make this character come alive--much of which you'll probably be able to use somewhere in your book, whether you use bits in his thoughts, or put it into dialogue.

This is NOT one of those forms where you fill in the kind of ice cream your hero likes. It is a stream-of-consciousness, flood of emotion and angst that comes from who this character is.

At a workshop years ago, best-selling author Susan Elizabeth Phillips said she was having a terrible time with a story. She just couldn't get the hero nailed....until she finally sat down and let the words flow in a first person bio. She writes fabulous secular books that are real page turners, but they don't involve suspense, weapons, or intense drama. Yet she said that the "first words out of that hero's mouth were 'I want a GUN!'" He was an action hero trapped in a very different kind of book, and going that deeply into his thoughts and personality helped her see what she needed to fix.

Finally, similar to the egocentric mind set of young children, every major character and major subplot character thinks he is the star of his own story. It will enrich your story if these people have goals, the motivation to achieve them, and inner/outer conflicts that make them struggle.

Giving key secondary characters this depth helps drive your story and add interest for the reader--as long as the secondary characters and subplot don't take over the story, and as long as their subplots impact and intersect with the main plot. If you've got parallel stories--like train tracks--where a subplot and secondary characters have no effect on the main characters, then that's wasted space. And if you give characters much space or go into their point of view, the reader will be expecting these people to really matter--and they won't.

SUMMARY How do we create believable characters? By

Making them psychologically plausible

Giving them a unique trait

Giving them crucial goals--something they need, not just something they want

Giving them major external and internal conflicts

Matching them up with characters with whom they'll have natural conflicts

Using the plot to force them to change and grow (a character arc)

Discussion Questions

1. What aspect do you like to start with, when first thinking about a new story? A character type? Or a vision of a big crisis scene or dramatic ending? A geographical area? Something else? Why?
2. What settings do you enjoy most?
3. I discussed how setting can play a big part in your story--and with rich, evocative details, how it can even become a character in itself. Can you think of some books you've read in which the author did an especially intriguing job of making her setting work for her story?

4. A cliched character has a predictable set of traits. A gentle, sweet teacher. An honorable, donut eating cop. A lean, cowboy who knows livestock but wouldn't be at home in New York. Can you come up with some other all-too familiar cliches?
5. A more interesting character can be created by giving him unexpected quirks. Look at the cliched examples above. How could you give these characters a unique, yet believable twist, and make him or her far more memorable to a reader?
6. Think of a familiar fairy tale, but set it in somewhere in the USA, 2010...which of course will change the story a lot! Now, try writing a first person bio in the point of view of the main character, who is facing his (or her) big, familiar story dilemma-- but in this new setting.
7. Look back at the books you've read. Who was the most memorable character, and why?

Next time, I will be talking a lot more about conflict and developing subplots. So stay tuned!

Happy Trails!
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