

Scene and Structure Seminar Gencon 2005 - Brad Beaulieu

Website: www.quillings.com

Suggested References:

The First Five Pages by Noah Lukeman

Self-Editing for Fiction Writers by Renni Browne

Scene and Structure by Jack M. Bickman

Thoughts on Seminar:

This was a well put together, if rushed, seminar. Brad is articulate and prepared with good technology skills (had nice Powerpoint presentation, business cards, and has a website where hand-out material will be available for download since more people showed than he thought would). Problems are that Brad had things very "planned" and not well timed. We did not make it through all the material in the hour allotted, he didn't have enough handouts, and since we blasted through about 3/4 of the material but didn't finish we had little time for questions. I suspect this is the first time Brad has done something of this kind and I think he'll take that into consideration in the future. Also, 90% of the information he gave us is in the third book on the reading list. If you get that book you will have everything he covered and, therefore, you won't need his seminar. The two other books on his suggested reading list were not really talked about at all but I have read them and they are the first two books I suggest to any person trying to get their writing act together. Noah's book, in particular, will really tell you what an editor is looking for and can save you from being dumped in the trash from the slush pile. My friend Kylie Chan is an example. She got a three book deal thanks to Noah, Renni, her own imagination, and a go-over by a writer's workshop.

Notes:

Brad spent most of his time going over information directly from the book Scene and Structure. Bickman breaks down everything with regard to plots and movement in a book by connecting one scene to the next. We started with styles of narrative:

Epistolary: The "letter writing" style. This is where someone tells a story to one person in writing by sending it in a letter. Problems with this style is that you are directing the story to only one person, usually by name, and that it becomes impersonal to the reader through both the fact that you are addressing someone *not* the reader and you are distancing the reader from both action and characters. The reader has nothing invested in this style.

The Journal Entry: We bloggers know this one well. It's not addressed to a specific person and is often only your own thoughts on paper or the internet. There is a more generic audience but the reader still has a "third wall" between themselves, the action, and the hero/heroine. It maintains informality but also remains impersonal.

Conversational: This style is usually in 1st person, as though telling a story verbally to a friend. This style gives a story both informality and immediacy but still has a narration barrier.

All Scenes Style: This style began with Dickens and most novels are now done in this style. It gives the author flexibility with regard to POV, immediacy, and transparency of narration.

We next lightly covered Point of View - which is defined as what type of narrator voice is used for the whole of a novel. (As an aside, I have often found that outside of academic circles people use the term "POV" interchangeably with "Character Perspective." As an academic, Brad makes a distinction between "head hopping" (or changing perspective between characters) and overall narrative structure or POV. Please keep this in mind as you read the notes.)

1st Person: The most common form of narrator focuses only on the hero or heroine and their perspective and internal thoughts or motivations. It is often used in conjunction with present tense for immediacy but is also used with past tense.

3rd Limited: The next most common form of narrator. In this the narrator is not the hero or heroine but a 3rd party that only has access to the internal thoughts or motivations of the main character. This is most easily explained as a "retelling" of a story told to you by the main character, that person would not have known what others were thinking and, therefore, the narrator would not as well.

3rd Omniscient: Third most common form of narration. This narrator is "godlike" and knows what ever character's motivations and thoughts are, not just that of the hero or heroine.

Other types of styles were also mentioned: "Document Novels" (where a novel is presented as documents and/or letters that make up the plot such as one that shows a crime through the police reports), "Collection Novels" (which are independent short stories by one author that are interconnected to tell a larger story), and "Stream of Consciousness."

95% of novels depend on structure of scene to move plot and story.

Brad then discussed plot, story, and development of said. Story and story arc should derive from ONE major goal. If you have more than one major goal your novel will be hard for the reader to follow and you will lose focus. Having more than one major goal in a novel is one of the first large mistakes most beginning authors make.

When you have a solid goal, the reader then creates questions in their mind:

Goal: Frodo must destroy the ring.

Reader Questions: How? Where? How will he get to his goal? Who will help him?

The author's job is to do two things: to create conflict and tension to move the story and, through those conflicts and tensions, answer the reader's questions about achieving the major goal of the story.

Structure of a Novel:

Structure of a novel can be broken down into 1) a person, 2) in a place, 3) has a problem that 4) they attempt to solve, 5) they fail to solve several times, 6) until they succeed in resolving the problem, 6) at which time the story ends (denouement/closure).

There are several ways to approach resolution of story arc. Two are the act and the scene.

Most people approach acts as one would a play and call the "act" form a three act arc. Here is how a three act arc is broken down:

1) Opening act: The inciting incident occurs. The main character tries to solve this problem but is not fully invested in the problem or it's resolution yet. (25% of the story)

2) 2nd act: The main character becomes fully invested in the resolution of the problem at hand and begins a try-fail cycle in which many options to resolve the issue are available at the beginning and they gradually dial down until only one possibility is left. During this time the character normally chooses the most simple or easy of the possibilities available in succession until only the most difficult and/or problematic one remains.

3) Final act: The main character now executes the last possibility for resolving the problem and finally succeeds (though it may cost him or a member of his party something, such as their life) therefore resolving the problem. This is the climax. Afterward, any small details are tied up and we have our happy (or not so happy) ending.

With the "scene" method, there is a pattern similar to this but it is broken down. Instead of using the large overview it breaks down everything into incidents. This means the "2nd act" is more fully fleshed out and the pace of the book, instead of ramping up until the end will often "spike" from one scene to the next in an ever increasing cycle of goal-conflict-disaster.

Each scene, until the final one, should use the following pattern:

Statement of Goal --- Introduction of Conflict --- Failure to Reach Goal/Disaster

The pattern above can be used in the adventure model as this:

The group needs the Rod of Power --- They argue over the ways to get the Rod and choose the easiest perceived way --- The leader then executes this plan only to have it fail for some reason --- The results of that failure set up the next plan, complication, and or plot twist in the overall goal to get the Rod until they finally achieve the objective.

Rules for scenes: Always have your characters in worse shape at the end of the scene than they were when they went into the start of the scene. A new complication or problem should always arise as the result of the failure to achieve the goal. A character MIGHT be allowed to achieve a mini-goal (IE they get to where the Ring was supposed to be and only half of it is there) as long as the over-all goal is not achieved and the achievement only ends in major disaster. (Character deaths are suggested, IE: Gandolf at Moria or Sturm at the Tower.) When a character loses an option for resolution of the problem it should always be FINAL - there is no turning back. You should also attempt to have at least one of the choices and/or failures involve an ethical dilemma.

Sub Plots:

Subplots are helpful for color but the success of a subplot should run convergent with the success of your main plot. It will have its own structure and you can use these to give your characters some kind of respite or happiness. They are also helpful for character development and can make your reader become more invested in the welfare of your characters.

Cause and Effect Structure:

Scene structure has, at its heart, cause and effect to drive it. Please keep in mind that life is random but novels are not. If you create some random event or chance meeting in your novel you should find a way for it to be not so random by the end (IE you run into some guy in a bar that sets you on the path but at the end he turns out to be the villain, needed to complete the quest, part of a subplot, or the god/motivator.) You need to find a balance between having earthquakes for no reason (real life) and having it there to motivate the story (an earthquake occurred and destroyed a town and the hero is left alone and, therefore, sets off to the next town where he will.....).

The difficult part of a novel is finding a balance so that your cause and effect chain doesn't seem predictable. Plot and success are based in cause and effect but if you are too heavy-handed your reader will see the end coming at page 30.

Most cause and effect can be broken down into a stimulus and response model. Stimulus and response are a microcosm of cause and effect where

Character A does something ---- Character B reacts ---- Character A responds to the reaction --- and on and on.

One of the largest problems new authors/writers have is to mix up the stimulus/response model by having people react to things before they see them. Be sure that your character's surprised expression or other action is a reaction to something or your reader will become confused. Every stimulus should have a response or it is not needed. Every response requires a stimulus or it is out of place. Response always follows a stimulus at once and taking too long to have Sally jump after the loud bang will only slow down your narrative!

The next cause and effect model can be broken down into:

Stimulus --- internalization --- response

In these cases you use exposition to fill in and give characterization or internal motivation to help explain the response. Perhaps someone says something to someone. The other person responds in an unexpected way. Using internalization the author can then explain that Sally has taken a vow of silence and Joe is nagging her to get her to break it thus her frown and deliberate actions without verbal response.

Scenes Have Results!

If you find that you are stuck in your writing -- that your story is getting nowhere -- then go back and read what you have. Without fail you will find that you have a place where you have no goal result. This is another problem beginning novelists often face. Just go back and chart your scenes. Are they all resolved? Did the characters clearly fail or clearly succeed? Did this failure or success set up another clear problem to solve? You must have

Goal - conflict - disaster

or a scene is not finished. Things that can cause your story to stall if you find that you do have goal-conflict-disaster are:

- The scope of the result is too large
- The scope of the result was too small or weak
- The result of the disaster was not immediate
- The result was not final
- The result was too final
- The result did not set up a new conflict or direction toward the larger goal of the story

If the scope of your result is too large it can derail your story. If you have a guy in a bar fight and you want to show that he's a great fighter you can have him kick the asses of 100 guys and it clearly tells the reader he's superhuman but what can he do next to top it? You've written yourself into a corner. Instead, try to show things in context with relative escalation.

If the scope of your result is too small, then you have the 98 pound weakling geek problem and the scene has no purpose but filler and should be cut.

If the result of your disaster has no immediacy then your tension lags and the story is told too slow. Your reader will put down the book, not care about your characters because they are not in peril, and you get the "blahblahblah" syndrome.

If the result of your disaster comes too fast and then hits the heels of the next one and next one it will keep the pace going but will tire the reader and you will sacrifice them caring about the characters.

When the result of your disaster is too final, the only real options are shut to you. This normally ends in a kill or be killed situation in which the only logical resolution is for the hero to die. If that happens and you don't have a sidekick you've got the reader invested in that then takes over the roll of hero then your story is over.

If your result is not final enough the reader feels cheated and ceases to care.

Other problems that can happen include having the direction of your result go awry. If there is not enough change or if the direction is not clear your characters will wander around with nothing to do and the reader will put down the book. If there is too much change it will be hard for the reader to keep up or to understand how the result happened. In other words: WTF? Happens. You can also get into the circular difficulty where effects of a problem cease to escalate because the ending of the last problem was not final. If you go into a cave to get something you either get it and get out or you find that it has been stolen. Otherwise it's like losing your keys in the house. You know they are there and just keep hunting over and over and over without end. Who wants to read that?

Often, overstating the conflict leads to an all-powerful bad guy or an all-powerful hero. In both cases there is no way for the other character to win and, therefore, no tension to the story. This is a common mistake. There must be an Achilles heel if you make someone overly-powerful.

Next, don't skip writing gore, angst, or bad results. You may love your characters and, as a result, not want to hurt them but the reader expects bad things to happen to good people. If you fail to deliver or to be "realistic" with your results you will not have a good novel.

Revision:

Writing the novel is the easy part. Revision is the part that is hard.

The writer's goal should be to clearly relate the story. All conflicts have to be about the goal. If they aren't (and they are not critical to the sub plot) then they should be cut out. Also, with regard to viewpoint, it is best to stay in a single viewpoint through a scene -- normally that of your hero. Writing fight scenes can be tough and if you head hop in the middle of fast action it is easy for both you and your reader to become confused as to who is doing what to whom.

Disasters move your story forward by moving your character AWAY from the goal. Keep this in mind. When your disaster occurs it should make reaching the goal harder than it was before they started. The easiest resolutions should be eliminated before taking the most difficult road to end the story.

Linking Scenes:

Linking one scene to another is called transition. Bridging the gaps between cause and effect/ problem and resolution can be done physically, internally, or both. Action transitions are apparent. Internal resolutions are called "sequels" and they give the author a chance to delve into the mental state of the character and present the reader their state of mind. Internal resolutions should include the following

- Emotional response to the disaster
- Intellectual response to the disaster (thought)
- Resolution by coming to a decision and choosing the next course of action
- Acting on the decision.

At this point we ran out of time but we did quickly discuss chapter use within story arc. This was the advice given: in general you want to end each chapter of your novel in the middle of a disaster or the end of a disaster (cliffhangers) to keep the reader from putting the bookmark in and ending their reading for the day (or night).