

Intricacies of Story Plotting
Gencon 2004 - Mike Stackpole
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This GenCon workshop was one of those that you have to register for and pay a nominal fee. Honestly, under 8 bucks to have an hour with Mike on this or any topic is a bargain for you today. In addition to this workshop, Mike does podcasts on writing craft and has a newsletter under the same name called "The Secrets." Mike does tie-in work for Lucas brands (X-wing) in addition to having his own original fantasy works. I'm serious. Mike is a great guy to listen to, he knows what he's talking about, and he's interesting when he does it (no monotone you could have read it from a book crap from Mike). He takes questions and if you are over 21, friendly, and have the inclination, find out which hotel he's in because he'll be killing brain cells down in the bar. You can buy him a drink or two and get even more bang for your buck.

Mike starts by talking about the difference between so-called "literary" programs and the "genre" school of writing. As I have mentioned to many (from my own experience getting my BA in lit crit) most writing programs that focus on cranking out "literary" authors disdain plot. To programs of this sort, plot is not seen as a positive and they don't like it when books have a "beginning," "middle," and "end." To them a novel is all about the exploration of character and having any kind of plot only takes away from the exploration of the human experience.

However, in genre or popular fiction the reader is looking for a plot. While you read for the characters it's the plot that holds the reader's attention when they can't connect to the character. It's something for the reader to do when they just don't care.

The crux to the good novel is that every character has a story or a life arc. They have a life goal and the steps this individual takes toward that goal are the essentials of your plot. If your character doesn't have a life goal -- a life arc -- then there is no reason for the character to be a point of view/lead character. You need to do this for more than just your hero and/or your villain.

Characters change and grow (or refuse to change and grow) through adversity. This adversity makes up the essential elements of your plot -- through a growth or destruction arc.

How do you move a story?

- 1) Identify Problems
- 2) Show the escalation of the problems
- 3) Show the rationalization and/or lower tension between crisis to show development of resolve
- 4) Give the critical moment of change
- 5) Be sure that the character has all the tools needed to accomplish the task or resolution of the problem -- other characters, information, objects

How do you do this realistically?

- 1) Research your topic in depth
- 2) Attempt to talk to people that participate or are in a similar situation if possible.

Mike points out that many people give the excuse that you can't research for a fantasy novel. He doesn't think this is true. There are social, political, and religious factors that should be a part of every culture. In addition, there are clichés and standard formulas for fairy tales, folk tales, and fantasy stories that one needs to know and understand -- both to use them to your advantage and to avoid them. For there to be some entry point for the reader into an alien culture or world, you must create a cohesive set of rules and social conditions. If you don't do the work and research required to know the weapons, magic system, geography, history, and culture of your own world then no reader is going to understand it much less will they be interested in reading about it.

Next, you have to know when to STOP doing research and just get on with writing. One of the critical things to avoid when you research is the "info dump." This often happens when you work in 3rd person omniscient. The narrator goes on and on and "dumps" all of the research you did into the text. (*Color me guilty BTW!*) The next form of info dump is "expository man," the character that seems to exist to say, "Do you remember three years ago when we did blahblahblabh or evil overlord Joe did this that and the other?"

Mike suggests you do these kind of "info dumps" during conversation -- often between main or toss off characters. By having someone go, "Did you hear that so-and-so is supposed to be in town?" you avoid the exposition problem and you also don't write yourself into a corner. If so-and-so isn't in town later but someone else then you don't have to go back and rewrite. Also, Mike suggests that you avoid absolutes as often as possible in your writing. By doing things in the form of rumor you can mislead your reader. It can create expectations and projections in your reader only to shock or surprise them later when the information turned out to be false.

One of the things that Mike advocates, and which he addressed next, is the fact that readers will identify certain things in a text and then project ahead -- trying to figure out the end of the story if you will. He says that to really hook a reader you should use this tendency. To Mike, the best books are the ones that surprise you. You read and you think you know how it's going to turn out. Example: your hero and some woman meet up and you start to assume after a couple of chapters that they are destined to be together. This is a typical story formula. Mike will play on this and may even have the hero and the woman bond or fall in love during their questing period only to have them meet up with someone, or reach a goal, and insert her fiancé, husband, or another character that will become a competing interest. Sometimes, he even kills the woman or the hero off. This usually comes as a shock to the reader and draws them further into the book because they suddenly realize that they have no idea what could happen next.

One of the next things Mike addresses has less to do with plot and more to do with craft or the "work" of writing. You can't publish something you haven't written. You may have the makings of the best novel ever up in your head -- a fantastic idea that everyone you speak to thinks is great -- but if you don't get it down into a book format then it will never go anywhere. He's got a point. As a result, Mike is an advocate of the "just write it and fix it later" philosophy. Lots of people craft a book and labor intensively over every sentence and paragraph. They re-read constantly. It takes them a very long time to write. Mike says this: you are going to have to edit this thing anyway, why make it like pulling teeth? Sure, you want to write the best novel you

can. Sure, you want to be sure you get everything just so. However, you have to FINISH. If you make Joe an orphan at the beginning and figure out later he needs to have some human vulnerability so you decide in chapter 9 that he needs to visit his bedridden mother in the nursing home to explain his drinking and lack of creature comforts then write from chapter 9 like Joe always had a parent. Then slap a post-it note on the front of page one of the novel that says, "Change Joe: add parent alive through chapter 9 on revision." He repeats over and over in his workshops the mantra, "FIX IT LATER!" This may not be a perfect philosophy for everyone but he's got a major point and I think he's right to keep pushing this idea onto people during his workshops. Far too many of us never really finish or reach the goal because we get bogged down in other things.

This leads to the next craft item mentioned. Mike insists that you should print out your chapters as you finish them. On paper. Print. As soon as the chapter is finished, even if you are on a roll, open the next document to start the next chapter and hit "print" for the previous one. Not only will you have a paper backup if your hard drive frags, but paper printouts are invaluable for revision, writing notes to yourself, and to catch typos and other problems.

Mike then addresses plot as a writing exercise in the overall scheme of a novel. People in the audience often ask him (and other writers in panels) how they manage to keep the plot threads in hand -- how do you have more than one plot and keep it all from getting away from you? Here is Mike's advice:

- 1) Use index cards.
- 2) Break down your plots into scenes/events
- 3) Write down the essential problems and dangers that must escalate until the problem is resolved with only one event, problem, or danger to a card
- 4) Identify which characters are involved in each of these issues
- 5) Use secondary characters when possible to move these scenes and issues
- 6) Use your WORLD as a character and be sure that any major catastrophic or environmental factors are also written on index cards for consideration in the plot matrix.
- 7) Lay out the cards on a table in order with the major plotline in the center then slip the other secondary plots above and below in parallel so you can easily visualize the plot movement and how the secondary characters and plots will gel or clash with the major plot.

The average SF/FA book runs between 100,000 and 120,00 words in length. Mike says a first time author with a book that is larger than 120,000 words will have a hard time finding someone to publish it without major edits. He says if you break down the writing of a novel, based on these numbers, that writing a novel is pretty manageable. Chapters should average between 2500 and 3000 words long. Longer than 3000 words and a person is likely to stick a bookmark in a chapter and stop reading. Shorter and it seems too rushed. This means your chapters will run about 10 typed pages in length.

Mike next suggests that each chapter end with a tease or a cliffhanger. This means there is some lead, crisis, or revelation that will cause the reader to keep going to the next chapter instead of

putting down the book. Example: Your characters have been in a cave and have managed to fight their way out. At the end of the chapter they emerge into the sunlight only to meet someone that says, "Wow! You guys made it! Great! But why are you sitting down? The town is on fire!"

Next, Mike discussed Point of View (POV) and Perspective. *(I should insert here that I have a real problem with people that think POV and character perspective are synonymous terms and don't distinguish between overarching narrator voice in a novel vs the shifts of perspective that happen from chapter to chapter and scene to scene. This is a personal peeve of mine. Mike often uses the term POV when what he really means is character perspective. He also recommends the Orson Scott Card reference Characters and Viewpoint which I have found to be only mildly helpful because the whole POV thing annoys me to no end. That's not to say that it doesn't have some very good advice but I've yet to manage to read the thing cover to cover in one sitting because my training in literary interp means that POV and character perspective are viewed as VERY different things and should be addressed as such. I shall now return you to Mike's stuff and get off my soapbox.)*

Mike is an advocate of having a minimum of three major POV characters and a maximum of five. Mike is also an advocate of writing in 1st person. There was a short discussion of narrator voice and POV and some of the different POV types: 1st person, 2nd person, 3rd person. Rightly, Mike pointed out that 2nd person can be off-putting to a reader, as well as being difficult to write, and that it doesn't really work for novels. He next explained that 3rd person, in addition to being more difficult to write than 1st, can also cause confusion for your reader thanks to something called "head hopping." Mike didn't go into much detail about "head hopping" but anyone who writes same sex relationships (much less sex scenes) for very long is going to run into this problem (and reader annoyance with it) pretty quickly. Head hopping is when you jump within a chapter from perspective of one character to another in a situation. Example: You start writing in a situation and you see it through the eyes of Jane. She's talking or doing something with Bob. Suddenly, they are doing something together, like kissing, and instead of showing Bob's response to Jane kissing him through Jane's eyes and mind you "jump" or "hop" into Bob's mind and give his thoughts and emotions. This is common and Mike says that it tends to confuse a reader and/or throw them out of the story and make them "work" while reading.

We will skip any argument about making a reader "work" while reading. This topic came up later in another discussion while talking about writing for your market and knowing your audience. I, personally, like to work when I'm reading and think the best authors and books make you do this but that's neither here nor there at this time. I'm giving you Mike's take on things and he's welcome to his opinion in this no matter how I may disagree.

The reason for a discussion of POV and character at this point is because Mike breaks down his work of writing a novel and the plot narrative by his characters. So, let's say you have a 120,000 word novel to write and you break that down into 3000 word chapters. That gives you 40 chapters. If you then work in 1st person and have 3 major POV characters you have about 13 chapters to write from each POV character's perspective -- or about 40,000 words a character. So, instead of thinking of an overwhelming number like 120,000 or 40 chapters you've got something smaller and more manageable to wrap your head around. It also gives you clear goals that you can easily break down into daily or weekly projects.

Next he talked about the fact that to be a really GOOD novel you need to have multi-layered plot. Mike feels that a good plot (or plots) in a book will cover three areas:

- 1) Political Problems
- 2) Physical Problems
- 3) Personal Problems

It's easy enough to write the quest novel where you have 5 typical fantasy characters that must go off and gain 5 objects then come together at the end of the book to get to a place and use said objects to create the thing that will stop the evil overlord. According to Mike, there are hundreds of books that do this. To make your book stand out, don't just have the 5 typical characters go off and gain the 5 objects then make the ultimate weapon and destroy the bad guy. Have two or more of the characters be from opposing political forces. Have one of the characters on the quest to get one of the objects be doing it because he doesn't WANT the ultimate weapon to be created (even though he or she doesn't want the bad guy to win). Have one of the characters HATE the other due to pre-existing political conditions so when they all come together at the end having them work together is almost impossible. The physical problems are pretty easy to add -- you have to do puzzles or fights or any number of other things to get to the objects and/or to assemble the weapon. Personal problems can be associated with the political but can also be romantic in nature. Everyone loves a love triangle. In short, every bit of plot, every event in the world, must be based both on a character need AND on a plot need. Every situation in your story must do double or even triple duty. This will keep your reader interested not only in the overall story but in the characters and their growth.

Finally, we get to what Mike thinks of as his most important piece of advice on plot: **KILL YOUR MAIN CHARACTERS.**

People often get annoyed with Mike because of his philosophy that all characters are created so they can die. He is one of the people that signed Chewie's death certificate in the Star Wars EU. Here is a short list of some of the essential reasons that Mike insists you must kill off characters in your story:

- 1) Sometimes the bad guys need to win in order for the story to seem plausible.
- 2) Death is a part of life and if your characters can't die then the story has no reality.
- 3) If good always triumphs over evil then there is no true sacrifice. There has to be a COST or there is no conflict and no tension -- therefore no real reason for the story to exist.

Not only does Mike suggest that you kill major characters, he also suggests that you kill off your most likeable ones -- the ones that you would hate to see die. He says that if you cry killing off the character then your reader is likely to be just as devastated as you by the death. Death should hurt. It should be emotionally wrenching not just for the surviving characters in your story but for the reader. He went to Lord of the Rings for a quick example: Boromir. Boromir's death was critical to the story. It changed the stakes for everyone. It broke the fellowship. It made Aragorn

determined to take up the mantle of his destiny. Boromir dishonored himself by trying to take the ring only to redeem himself in his defense of the hobbits and his death becomes all the more tragic as a result. Mike feels that this is the kind of thing every writer should shoot for and that to do any less is to take the easy way out both with your plot and characterization. In this, Mike and I are in perfect agreement. Kill 'em all. Got five POV characters? Kill at least two before the end of the book.

Mike moved back to some writing craft at this point and talked about making outlines. He uses the index cards for plotting then uses those to make his outline. He emphasizes that an outline is to a novel what a road map is to a road trip. It's your possible ways of getting to your destination but you don't have to stick to the main highway or keep to the planned route. Just because you get in the car and say you're going to take I-70 to Philadelphia doesn't mean you have to go to Philadelphia much less take I-70 to get there. He also has a secondary reason for making an outline: he gets paid for them.

For those who don't know how an existing writer operates, you turn in a proposal to an editor for a book with letter that gives a basic premise for the novel and/or trilogy of books. You may also send in a page that has this summary along with your main characters and a short blurb about each character. Your editor will they give it a "sounds interesting" or "no thanks." If you get the "sounds interesting," then you make an outline and send it in (or, if it's the books that follow the first in a contracted trilogy then you send in your outline for the next bit). This is when you get earnest money toward the book. You'll usually get your next bit when you send the finished draft in for review and editing. You'll get your next bit against returns when the novel comes out. So, not only does Mike recommend outlines for novels as a writing aide but also because you'll likely have to make one anyway for your editor and if you get it out of the way up front you get paid that much faster. To top it off, just about every editor knows that the outline for a book and the finished novel are likely to be very different. You may plan that certain events will take place over the course of 35-40 chapters only to find that as you write the story those events are taking far longer. (*I experienced this with LG which was initially planned as only 35 chapters and ended up being 77.*) A certain amount of this is expected by an editor. They will still expect to see the major characters you gave descriptions of. They will expect the world you described. But if you only get through half the events in the outline, or if you get through the events but the main characters that survive or end up doing the action are different, an editor is perfectly OK with this. You aren't wedded to the outline as an absolute so don't be afraid to make one.

At this point the audience started asking questions. Mike began responding to these. Someone brought up the concept of "writer's block" and asked how to get around it.

Mike's response is that there is no such thing as writer's block only people that either don't know their characters (and keep in mind here that Mike views the world as a character) well enough to know how they would act in a given situation or those that have not made the story complex enough. When Mike gets to a point where the story isn't flowing well and he's thinking that the story is complex and he isn't sure what direction to go in next, he makes a new problem. That's right, Mike makes things MORE complex when the going gets tough. He says that adding more always gets him out of a jam and that writers that don't add more or write into a corner and then get out of it by *dues ex machina* are copping out and that they let down their readers.

Someone then asked how to know if your characters and/or plot are complex enough? Mike responded with this: Ask yourself, "If I pull this character or event out, how would it change the book?" If you can pull a character or a plot thread out and it doesn't totally screw up everything in every chapter then you have not properly woven together your story. All events and all characters should be so intertwined and necessary that if you take one out it will alter the book completely.

Next, someone asked about writing and how you know you are finished working on something. Since Mike is of the, "get it finished and go back and change it after" ilk, this is a reasonable question. Mike gave his own personal view and said that plenty of other people do things in different ways but that it all comes down to feeling satisfied that you've done the best you could. He runs through the first draft fast to get it finished. He then does a 2nd draft where he incorporates all the notes he slapped on the first draft and adds or restructures the book to ensure that the plot(s) are interwoven and that there is consistency of events. In the 3rd draft he gets down and dirty with language -- polishing, tightening, going over grammar, and wordsmithing. After the 3rd draft, if he finds that the change between drafts is 10% or less he feels that it is done.

This led someone to ask about the trilogy concept and how to know where to end each book. Mike feels that while you need to have overarching events and plot that span all three books, you need to have one or two characters that have a subplot that gets resolved within each book -- that these events or character growth issues are at an end or stopping point. By doing this you give the reader some satisfaction of conclusive growth and event resolution while still having other characters *in extremis* or events hanging out there. This gives enough relief to a reader that the book feels it has reached its natural stop point but also leaves them with anticipation so they will be waiting for the next book.

That's pretty much the substance of Mike's plot lecture.