

Story Superglue: Make It Stick with Readers

By
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(For the longer, full-color version of this handout, please visit my website,
www.SusanGable.com, and look for writer resources/articles.)

"Craft is always secondary to the **truth** of **emotional connection**." Konstantin Stanislavsky

What is it that makes a story stick with a reader? Something that lingers with them rather than being forgotten as soon as the book is closed? For most readers, it's the **characters** and the **emotional response** the story evoked.

The writer's job, in creating fiction, is to be true to the story, the characters, and life in general. Craft mastery is needed, but it is **secondary** to the emotions, to the truth. There are many technically flawless pieces out there that fail to connect the reader to the character. Often they're labeled as "flat." Lacking spark. Building that bond of connection can be what separates a rejected piece from an accepted one, from a book that leaves the reader with a ho-hum, okay opinion of the book to one of excitement, of a story that lingers in the reader's mind.

I. Character Development

The characters must live for you before they can come alive for the readers.

Personality basics

 Birthday/Zodiac/Chinese Zodiac

 Enneagrams <http://www.enneagraminstitute.com/>

http://www.booklaurie.com/workshops_psych.html

Details – choose specific details for character's life/setting that SHOW personality traits rather than TELL them. Sudoku or crossword or videogame? Vehicle? Purse contents? (Audience participation activity)

Know the emotional connection/backstory relationship to some of the specific items that populate character's setting. (See "In Their Closet" exercise.)

Don't overdo – just because you know something about the character doesn't mean it should be included in the story. Also don't "litter" the story with the details. A few will do it.

Organic conflict/greatest fear

GMC – Debra Dixon's Book, *Goal, Motivation, & Conflict: The Building Blocks of Good Fiction*, is HIGHLY RECOMMENDED! www.gryphonbooksforwriters.com

Motto/Core Values – character’s behavior and choices will reflect this core motto, these values, and should play a part in their GMC and character growth as well as the plot. Conflict can stem-from/play-off these mottos.

II. Emotional Connection

To connect with the readers’ emotions, first you must connect with your characters’ emotions. If you don’t feel it, neither will your readers.

Method Writing

Moodsetting –

POV – sensual selectivity - notice the right things for POV character in that mood. (audience participation activity) Choosing strong words to SHOW character reactions/emotions/select details

Employ the senses (sensual – not just for sex.)

Writer’s space – lighting, music, scents

Writer’s Dark Places – powerful tools, use them, but don’t let them overwhelm the story reality.

Character responses must ring true for them – House and Monk would react very differently to the same situation.

Emotions are like ogres – they have layers.

Avoid clichés – dig deeper, make the less obvious choice.

Appropriate use of internal dialog

Subconscious – instinct – self-trust – sleep/dream writing

Resources:

From Where You Dream: The Process of Writing Fiction by Robert Olen Butler
Writing from the Inside Out by Dennis Palumbo

Exercises to try:

As the character...

...open a closet or storage area in the place where you live. Detail 3 items you find in that place. What’s the emotional attachment to the item? Backstory for it – a flash of character memory that goes with it?

... in the living space, there are photographs displayed. (mantle, wall, dresser – where?) Look at 3 of them. Again, what emotions and backstory go with those photos?

...what's in her purse? Why? (Does she even have a purse? Why or why not?) There's a pebble in it. Why? What does this tell you about character? What's in her purse that represents conflict between hero and heroine?

...go to any particular setting from the story with the character in a down mood. What does he/she notice? Now, take the character there in an up mood. What does character notice now? Practice sensual selectivity.

Red – Physical reactions/responses/behaviors

Blue – Sensory details – visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile all here. But don't add things just for the sake of adding them. Putting a TASTE in this scene would have been very silly, and yet, there's the lasagna, which played a significant role in previous scene. In theory, could have had a sick taste in her mouth.

Green – strong verbs that relate to character's mood here

(Colors not available on this handout. Refer to overhead projector slides, or handout available on my website.)

There's also a smidge of backstory that becomes clear in this bit, and a big emotional meltdown about to occur that not only reveals something this character didn't even realize about herself, but will solidify the conflict between my hero and heroine, and pave the way for both the black moment and the story resolution.

She found herself outside the Emergency entrance. Squaring her shoulders, she jumped when the automatic doors whooshed open, then strode through them.

About three steps inside, the scent of antiseptic and cleaning fluids attacked her nose. Her stomach lurched, threatening to return the lasagna. The harsh glare of the fluorescent lights made her blink rapidly.

The nurse at the reception desk scribbled information from a man cradling his towel-wrapped hand in his lap. Murmurs of low voices echoed through the hallway. Rachel swallowed hard and moved towards the waiting area.

Blue plastic chairs - hard-looking, not meant to be inviting. Small tables cluttered with magazines sporting tattered covers, and pamphlets about STDs and deadly diseases. In the corner of the room, a television blared CNN - more crime, more disease, more bad news.

