



COMPELLING CHARACTER ARCS

THE THREE KEYS TO CRAFTING COMPELLING STORIES

- ▶ 1. Set the expectations of your reader early, and utilize a system to ensure that those expectations are met by the end of the book – PROMISES
- ▶ 2. Create a relatable set of dilemmas that your audience can invest in, regardless of your characters' backstories or their worlds – DILEMMAS
- ▶ 3. Set up a connected flow of actions and consequences that pull your reader through your story instead of pushing her along – FLOW

▶ PROMISES – DILEMMAS – FLOW



DILEMMAS

Create a relatable set of dilemmas that your audience can invest in, regardless of your characters' backstories or their worlds

DILEMMAS – CONFLICT & ACTION

- ▶ Conflict is the engine that powers your story...BUT that's all engines can do—produce power.
- ▶ Actions are the wheels of your story
- ▶ BUT...you still need a mechanism to tie the two together—take the raw power of conflict and translate it into action on the page
- ▶ That mechanism is dilemmas
 - ▶ Making your characters face relatable dilemmas is what will keep your readers glued to the page

DILEMMAS – ACTIONS

- ▶ Actions are decisions
- ▶ Decisions are conflict brought to life. That's why people hate making them
- ▶ Decisions are relatable. We can't avoid them. No matter how crazy your story gets, if the focus remains on decisions, the audience will follow you
- ▶ Decisions lead to consequences, which lead to more decisions, which lead to more consequences...On and on until the end of the story

DILEMMAS – EMOTIONALLY RESONANT

- ▶ If you make the dilemmas in your story relatable and your characters' decisions around them honest and true to their character traits, your audience will empathize
- ▶ The emotions that surround dilemmas and decisions are what make stories universal
- ▶ We don't have the same experiences, but we share the same emotions
- ▶ Crafting moments that allow your audience to recognize the familiar in the unknown is your job as an author

RELATABLE DILEMMAS

- ▶ **Rocky** - Know what it's like to be in over our heads
- ▶ **Pride and Prejudice** - Know what it's like to worry over family and finances
- ▶ **The Piano** - Know what it's like to want somebody you shouldn't
- ▶ **Cape Fear** - Know the worry of someone attacking your family
- ▶ **Lion King** - Know the worry of not living up to our family's expectations

CHARACTER ARCS

- ▶ A character arc is the journey a protagonist takes from one set of ineffective traits to a more effective set
- ▶ Story starts out with your characters living in their Ordinary World
- ▶ The traits and skills they start with are effective for *that* world, but once the action starts (Inciting Incident) they face a new Dilemma—one they've never had to face before, and their defining traits are not up to the task of solving it

BEGINNING TRAITS

- ▶ List your protagonist's character traits—This will be easier if she's a fully formed character, but don't worry you can always do this after you've finished a draft if you're more of a pantser
- ▶ Find the ones that best form the filters through which she experiences and defines her world
- ▶ Cull the list down to the two or three (depending on plot complexity and story length) that define her the best
- ▶ Don't think in terms of "good" or "bad". Remember this is about effective vs. ineffective for her current situation

EXAMPLE – BOURNE IDENTITY

- ▶ **Adrift** - When the movie starts Jason is both literally and figuratively adrift. He's in the middle of the ocean. He doesn't know who he is. He doesn't know what kind of person he is. All he knows is that he has a practiced set of incredibly effective and violent skills, and he's afraid of them
- ▶ **Curious** - More than anything he wants answers.
- ▶ **Vulnerable** - It's the first thing he confesses to Marie. He's open and honest with her about his situation and mystery skills. He even allows himself to trust her enough to get his first good night sleep while she drives.

EXAMPLE – BRIDGET JONES' DIARY

- ▶ Through the whole story the core of who Bridget Jones is stays strong. This is really an arc that focuses on changing traits & skills and not personality
- ▶ **Lonely** - Act is desperate ways to fill her empty parts
- ▶ **Uncomfortable** - With her body, with how she presents herself, with her awkward interactions with other characters
- ▶ **Dreamer** - Refuses to see clear red flags and face reality in as a way of keeping her hopes and dreams alive

IDEAL SELF

- ▶ Now that you have your character's beginning traits, come up with a word that best defines them
- ▶ **Bourne Identity** - Questioning
- ▶ **Bridget Jones' Diary** - Needy
- ▶ This is the headspace that your character will be making their decisions from at the beginning of the story

RANKING

- ▶ Now rank these beginning traits from Hardest to change to Easiest to change
- ▶ **Bourne Identity** - 1) Adrift 2) Curious 3) Vulnerable
- ▶ **Bridget Jones' Diary** - 1) Lonely 2) Uncomfortable 3) Dreamer
- ▶ Why rank? Because the harder a trait is to change the longer it is going to take to change it

TRAITS AND DECISIONS

- ▶ Now that you have the traits named and ranked you need to **show** them to your readers
- ▶ Do this by using them as the touchstones your protagonist uses to make decisions (actions)

BOURNE IDENTITY - TRAITS AND DECISIONS

- ▶ **Adrift** - When he wakes up on boat his instincts are violent, but he immediately calms them. While he doesn't know who he is, he takes on a working role on the boat
- ▶ **Curious** - As soon as he's off the boat he goes to the bank to follow his only lead of who he is. Continues with the search even after the contents of his safety deposit box shows that he's dangerous
- ▶ **Vulnerable** - He allows himself to fall asleep while Marie is driving. He decides to tell her the truth about everything that is going on with him

BRIDGET JONES' DIARY – TRAITS AND DECISIONS

- ▶ Lonely - After hearing Darcy's mean comment she decides to journal her way out of being single
- ▶ Uncomfortable - She decides to start flirting with her handsome boss
- ▶ Dreamer - She decides to accept his non-answer when she tells him that she loves him

ENDING TRAITS

- ▶ As your characters make decisions from these ineffective traits their situation will grow worse. This makes it clear that they have to change and grow in order to solve their problem
- ▶ End traits don't necessarily need to be the opposite of the beginning traits. Use what's effective not what's easy
- ▶ Show these more effective traits through your protagonist's decisions

BOURNE IDENTITY – ENDING TRAITS

- ▶ **Vulnerable to Noble** - Decides to send Marie away to a place he doesn't know about so she will be safe
- ▶ **Curious to Assured** - Decides to face Treadstone head on
- ▶ **Adrift to Determined** - Decides he doesn't want to be Jason Bourne anymore
- ▶ Leads to Ending **True Self** of **Secure**

BRIDGET JONES' DIARY – ENDING TRAITS

- ▶ Dreamer to Realist - She leaves Daniel and gets a new job when she finds him cheating
- ▶ Uncomfortable to Comfortable - Decides to invite Mark in when he comes to her door and let him stay at her dinner party
- ▶ Lonely to Full - She decides to come out of her funk and go with her friends to Paris. Decides to stay when Mark arrived because she wants him in her life



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