



Peeling Yourself Off the Wall 20 Ways to Duck the Writers Block Bullet

Beth Daniels
April 2011

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Introduction and Lecture #1

You know, it doesn't really matter whether you're a meticulous plotter or a clueless-until-it-leaves-your-fingertips Pantser – somewhere along the line you're going to hit the tall, broad, barbed wire and broken glass topped wall of writer's block. Unless you're writing westerns, and then it might be like riding into the Grand Canyon, having your horse break his leg and have to be put down, and not having a boat to get pasted the rapids or the rock climbing gear or experience to scale the canyon walls.

Either way you're stuck.

And the longer the word count in a tale, the more often those walls poof into being. That's when the story I loved begins to be referred to as "the book from Hell". Oddly enough, nearly every book that has turned out extremely well (in that I'm proud of it) has carried that moniker for weeks on end.

I've read a lot of books on how to avoid writer's block – not a one helped me one bit. I've listened at conferences as writers talked about how to side step writer's block – nada bit of help. So I dreamed up my own ways around things.

Not all of them work every single time, which is why there are twenty of them presented here. One will have me pole vaulting over the wall with ease in one book and slam me against the unyielding surface in another manuscript. I work my way through them.

In fact, I'm going to say right away, adjust these as suits you best. Dump ones that don't appeal to you. But for the sake of the workshop, take each out for a test drive. If you find the seat is too high, too wide, too straight, the steering wheel too small, too big, too unwieldy, and the upholstery squeaks when you move, head on to the next model and kick the tires, try the sunroof and fiddle with the air conditioning controls. If you take it out on the road and run into trouble, call OnStar – or post a yelp here in the group. Actually, that will probably work better than OnStar.

By the way, I don't do outlines. I do game plans. That is I decide how long in word count my chapters usually run, divide the word count by that and come up with how many chapters I'll need. Then I come up with something that is going to happen in each...okay, in many of them. I try to stay at least two chapters ahead of my flying fingers in knowing where the story is going.

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That's not an outline. It's a plan that can morph easily, ducking and weaving to meet whatever the characters have thrown at me along the way. They never pay attention to everything I have planned for them and I've learned to pay attention to them after five or six chapters. It's their life, not mine.

Okay, having said that...

We have twenty ideas to work our way through when it comes to ducking those writer's block bullets. Today I'm just giving you the first one. I call it TIMELINE.

WORKING THE TIMELINE

Now, creating a timeline can go chapter by chapter or it can cover the book as a whole without the chapters delineated. It's your choice. If you are trying to integrate parts of your fictional storyline with elements of real events, having a timeline may be indispensable.

Anyone see the movie VANTAGE POINT with Dennis Quaid? They kept replaying the same first scene, only we watched it from another character's POV, which then added to the detail since each character saw or experienced something different during, as well as after, the assassination of officials, one of whom was the president's double.

In a way, this is what your timeline can resemble.

Since formatting gets wiped out so often when things are transferred into the virtual classrooms and meeting halls, I've got a sample for you on my website (www.RomanceAndMystery.com) in the Workshop section (the link click to it will be on the left hand side of the Home page, then on PLOTTING FOR PANTSERS (because I trotted this idea out in that workshop first) to see what's going on in one chapter with four different characters. Click on the example itself to copy it to a blank document if you'd like.

By the way, all of these characters are not in the same scene as VANTAGE POINT keeps replaying. But they are in the same day and this shows what they are doing around the same time. You can do it either way since you are attempting to jump start the story.

The selection I used in the example is a scene from early in my historical western romance LUCKY. Thorton and Harte are my main characters, Yancy is her cousin, and Cherise works for the villain.

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I could have made it more detailed by giving Deke and Virgil, the lower rung bad guys, their own columns as well, and one for Harte's friend Jane, but I tend to stick with just the main characters, the ones who will have POVs within the story, whether they are "heard" in the current chapter or not. In the sample, Yancy's movements are given but in the actual book he doesn't have a POV in this segment. But we still need to know what he's doing.

The set up is based on the chronological clock here. As Cherise's scene happens before the other characters return to their rooms at the hotel, hers appears first although hers is one of the lesser seen POVs.

Next we have Harte's part of the chapter, and finally Thorton's section. Again, all based on the time element.

At some workshops I've attended, there have been authors who worked out incredibly wide (based on the number of columns used) timelines. Frequently that is because they were integrating their fictional characters with historic events and required a strong degree of historic accuracy, not just keeping track of characters with POVs. (And they were rabid plotters, too.) In the more involved Timelines, it would be like inserting a couple fictional soldiers into a platoon of real people and sending them off into the mountains of Afghanistan to find or engage the enemy. You need what really happened to come out right, but you need your fake folks to work realistically within the set framework of what really DID happen if you are using a true event. You can't beat a timeline for that.

Timelines also work for contemporaries that aren't using anything that is real, not folks or facts to clutter up your fiction. (I say contemporaries here because I don't think it's possible to do a historical without some degree of historic fact entering into the equation. Science fiction needs a base in ongoing science and fantasy depends on legend and myth for many details.)

Since no story is about a man (or woman) alone – we always need to know what they think of others or what is happening back at home or in the search and rescue headquarters or whatever even if they washed up on a previously uninhabited island (or planet) – timelines can tell you what is happening "off screen" that you might need to reference later as behind the scenes events.

Or to give you some new ideas on how to leap into the story waiting on the other side of the wall.

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Timelines not only keep track of your characters, telling you what they are each doing at any or nearly any moment, they help you keep track of how much time has elapsed on the story clock. I added a column to the left that gives the day or location and the time of day: Reno, 5pm, 7pm, 9pm...etc. As I never worked out the specific day of the week, it wasn't included. Your story might require that addition. The minutes and hours clicking by as seen on the clock are very important, particularly if your storyline covers a very short time period. Both DA VINCI CODE and ANGELS AND DEMONS from Dan Brown take place within the space of 24 hours – including the characters' travel time between locations.

Keeping track of time or dates is particularly important if some situations in the story depend on what could actually be accomplished within a given time, too.

Not long ago I was working with another writer on a story, co-writing it. We'd send bits back and forth by e-mail. One day she said it was time we wrote the scene where the police made the arrest. But I begged to differ. While we had over 50,000 words, which was 60% of our story and what she was thinking about, she'd forgotten that all the scenes we'd written had yet to cover 24 hours in our character's lives. The local police couldn't have gathered and processed the things they'd collected at the crime scene (we'd blown it up), much less put their case together and get a warrant for the arrest of our innocent hero. The difference was, I had a timeline going and she didn't. We also had decided to not do a lot of pre-plotting on the story but to wing it (she's not a plotter either). That didn't mean elements couldn't be noted down as they occurred though. That's how I was keeping track of the time elapsed on the clock, and why she had totally missed that element.

If you are writing a story with more than a single storyline, such as a secondary tale that follows two of your second rung characters, the timeline helps integrate what they are doing with what your main characters are doing.

Liz Bevarly tends to have two couples working things out in her longer storylines. There is the main hero and heroine's story and within it another couple meet and fall in love as well, only with a different set of "obstructions" to overcome than the main couple. Yet, because the secondary couple is part of the main couple's story, there needs to be meshing of the two storylines, and that might best be accomplished with a timeline. It keeps all four of them from going to dinner together at one restaurant and separately at different restaurants on the same day at the same hour, if nothing else. <grin>

Knowing where all your characters are standing at one point in time, can't be bad, can it? No! It's helpful. It's the BIG PICTURE!

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But our bigger picture is that damn wall, right? So here is your Challenge for the day (I like that word better than Assignment).

Pull out the manuscript where you've hit the big ugly wall. Now pull out a note pad and pencil (yes, old fashioned of me, isn't it? But I want to be able to scroll through the manuscript at will without changing or reducing and enlarging screens) and do one or more than one of the following:

- a) write down what is happening at the same time in the story for other characters and see if there is something you missed or a different way you could go in the story at this point
- b) if there are more than one of your POV characters standing there with you, redo the scene from a different POV – even if you aren't letting this other character have a POV in the story. You are looking for ideas and they just may have them. You could always do the VANTAGE POINT thing and look at the scene from more than two pair of fictional eyes, too
- c) pull up a handy rock and get your main character talking. Interview him or her with specific questions or just let them talk. I let them babble because that's when I find the golden nugget with which to bribe the wall guardian to boost me over it
- d) back up to where things were still going well and see if tossing out (killing, deleting, obliterating) any comments, actions, plans, or mistakes the character made as they went towards the wall will hijack them from doing whatever it was that lead to the wall. If this means staring into space to come up with a new game plan, so be it. When a coach finds the opposing team isn't using the same playbook they did in their past five games, and thus his game plan isn't working, he doesn't stick with that plan. He shuffles things up, around, goes in a different direction. That's what you're doing here.

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Okay! Think this will keep you occupied for a bit? Since this is our first week, I'll post a second lecture on Thursday night for your weekend edification. (And at least I have the days right this time, having no doubt confused you by saying I was posting on Tuesday night for things to be up on Monday morning...I meant Wednesday – where's a proof reader when one needs one?!)

In the meantime, I think this should keep you off the streets and out of the bars...maybe not your characters, but.... <grin>

Beth

Lecture #2

It might be handy if we began to count these to make sure we have 20 of them, right? TIMELINE was #1, so...

2) A BOUQUET OF THE DOCTOR'S GLOVES

Now that's really got you wondering, doesn't it? I used to call this the Skeleton but students told me all the talk about bones linking to other bones confused the heck out of them. One of them suggested a visual that started with bare bones and then added layers of tissue, muscle, veins, nerves and finally skin and hair made much more sense. More of a Frankenstein's monster, so I considered changing the name to "Victor's Boy". That still didn't quite make it, so...

Mentally take a box of those gloves they wear once then toss at the doctor's office or other places where germs and things we don't even want to mention are involved. Write things on each of the fingers that go together to make up one scene.

Let's return to Indian Jones and a Perils of Pauline thing. The palm of the glove says: escape back down tunnel. Write RUN ACROSS IDOL CHAMBER on the thumb; TOSS IDOL TO GUIDE on the index finger; LEAP ACROSS PIT on the middle finger; FIND GUIDE SEE BOULDER'S APPROACH on the ring finger; and RUSH DOWN TUNNEL AND DIVE FOR ENTRANCE on the pinky.

Take another glove and move to the next scene. Palm of glove has: learn of Ark. Here are the fingers: MEET GOV MEN; MAKE CONNECTION TO RAVENWOOD; EXPLAIN ARK with ILLUSTRATED BIBLE (foreshadowing); MEDALLION DRAWN EXPLAINED; PACK SUITCASE include gun MENTION MARIAN.

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Do this for as many scenes as you have. You'll only be missing the transitions from one to the other.

Now do like they do in comedic movies and TV shows – figuratively blow the glove up like you would a balloon. Use mental helium so you don't get out of breath and the "balloon" floats nicely. Now, tie a virtual string to it and collect all the marked on and blown up gloves together into a bouncing, floating bundle or bouquet. Voila! This is your book.

Or is it? I mean, this is what you had before you hit the wall, isn't it?

Here's what we're going to do. Either pull down the scene/balloon that smacked you into the wall.

You have a choice now:

- 1) create a new scene to follow it
- 2) pop the glove balloon and rewrite the scene – HOWEVER, you can't use the same elements you did originally.

Let's say that instead of Marian entering into the scene, or the G-men, that Sala gets a message to Indy saying he's part of a dig at Tanus...and while it's a Frenchman conducting the dig, there are Germans everywhere. He's overheard that they are looking for the Ark of the Covenant.

This would send Indy straight to Egypt without stopping in the Himalayas. As we're writing Marian entirely out of this version – at least for now – it is now Indy that Abner Ravenwood gave the Headpiece of Ra to and it's been in a safe in Marcus's office all this time. They get it out, hold it to the light and the glint of gold is reflected back off the gun in Indy's hand just before he tosses the pistol in his suitcase.

We aren't going totally off point here from the original concept, but we are cutting out a few scenes and episodes that have Marian in them, which does change the stage by stage unfolding of the story, doesn't it?

Perhaps in backing up and moving in a different direction, we'll miss the writer's block bullet this time.

The idea of the bouquet of doctor's glove balloons supplies a different sort of mental picture of how the different elements can come together. Each scene is one glove hand and they are

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all linked together. Until the book is together, we may not be sure of how they do, or of which scene leads to the next, but if you consider the strings the transitions, one glove balloon could always be tied to the next in a long string of “events” and they could bob against the ceiling in the order you plan to use them. Or be moved.

Or popped.

No matter what we call it, this has a lot in common with an outline but looks a bit more interesting. At least to my mind. And as you do it one glove balloon at a time, it’s a progression when you need to progress, the whole batch of balloons need not be blown up at once. I mean, the clown selling them would only carry so many at a time and go back for more when they were needed, so why can’t you?

You could also write different things on these gloves or make up a sequence you are comfortable following and use it as the guideline on what to indicate in the palm of the glove and what would appear on each finger. Things like VISUALS, ACTION, GOALS or GOALS LOST, CHARACTER INDICATIONS, INFORMATION GIVEN. You could replace one of these each time with FORESHADOWING or CLUE/RED HERRING, with EMOTION, BACKSTORY, or something else that will be the basis for building your scenes. You could have two different colors of gloves, one indicating more action as with the ESCAPE balloon and another the more informational as with the LEARN OF ARK one. And since these are only mentally created balloons, you can have as many different colors as you like – a different color for each POV, perhaps?

If you want to jettison the bouquet of glove balloon idea and go back to calling it a skeleton, go for it. This is all about how you want to construct an underlying game plan for your book to follow...heck, that every book you write might well follow in the future if it works out well. I can see it as a way to remind oneself to include certain things in a series that readers would expect. Sort of like Janet Evanovich making sure Stephanie Plum has vehicle disasters left and right (although I did enjoy the story where she did a switch and instead of vehicles it was Ranger’s men who kept being put out of commission), or that characters that haven’t a large part in a particular book still make an appearance because they are part of Stephanie’s world – and that list for Evanovich probably includes Grandma, Mom, Dad, Bob the dog, Rex the hamster, the latest batch of funerals in the Berg, the chicken place... Well, you get the idea. And the longer a series runs, the more such elements need to be worked in somewhere along the way.

You don’t have to have a series in progress, or even a number of published manuscripts

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among your list of accomplishments. But if you have certain elements or goals or have a ticking clock feature in the story, these should all be things written in the palm of a virtual glove, then turned into episodic fingers to use as a guideline.

We're just trying to get a nice visual to aid in getting our own game plan together though. Lighten things up a bit since writer's block is serious business. Hence, the bouquet of doctor's gloves.

3) ADDING A SECONDARY STORYLINE

Now, granted, this doesn't work on short books, but once you hit the 90,000 words required length, having a secondary storyline could enhance your story.

It needs to intertwine with your main story though and the characters involved here need to be closely involved with the main characters. Their storyline will be a tricky one because, if you run long and need to cut, it is their tale that will most likely disappear. Therefore it has to be pertinent to the major story arc but easily removed if necessary.

It could also result in a spin-off story in the future.

But that's in the future (where one always needs to have an idea for a similar story in mind to follow the current one).

Because we're more concerned with THIS story though – and getting around that writer's block -think of this as further layering. You want a rich story, lots of adventure calories and emotional fats. The combination makes for a delicious creation. Since we can't have those things on our plates, whether as a meal or a dessert, let's put the equivalent down on paper to thrill ourselves as well as future readers.

I'm going use one of my own titles for the example here because I know why I did things to maneuver around, under or over that tall gray block wall that was holding things up.

When I first planned AT TWILIGHT, a historical set in 1868 Texas, I thought I had just three main characters: hero, heroine, and villain. My secondary characters were the heroine's baby – who supplied one type of diversion when I got stuck because the hero or the heroine could interact with her. At 3 months old she didn't have a lot to say for herself but they both talked to her or took care of her, passed her back and forth. That

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didn't exactly shift the wall much, but it offered an opportunity to drop some information as they talked to the baby. Let's say it allowed me to find a hole at ground level to squirm through to the other side.

The real wall leveler was Diamond, the hero's sister though. To work around one of the first large walls I hit, I decided to give her a POV. As she was not with the main characters, but deeper into Texas, further down the trail than they were at that time, in enlarging her part I could come up with more of those doctor's glove balloons for her scenes, giving myself not only more story but a change of scene – literally as she was usually seen in a saloon at a card table or in a hotel room.

I'll confess, I didn't at first work out a plan for her. I just started writing in her POV. When I'd finished that first scene, the wall was gone. It worked as a transition back to where I needed to be and it had begun supplying more information to me to act on in the future. Where I left Diamond gave me a place to pick things up with J. W. and Louisa and the baby out on the trail.

Because it worked, I jotted down some other ideas that could come in handy down the way. It turned out she had a black maid with her, one who had been born free and worked with abolitionists but who felt Diamond shouldn't be traveling alone, so she was a companion posing as a maid. Then a ghost from Diamond's past walked in and sat down at her poker table another time, the man she might have married had she not wed his classmate at West Point. So I gave her a chance to have a romance, though in the end I didn't act on it, but I did use him to round up the bad guys (the one's her brother and the heroine had left wounded) at the conclusion. Diamond had sent him and his troop to them. (Further research had supplied that the Army was the police force in 1868 in Texas, you see, not the Texas Rangers as I'd originally thought.) And surprisingly, just when I thought Diamond had served all possible purposes and put her on a stage out of town, she turned up in the last few pages to save her brother from the villain, who had conveniently escaped capture prior to this.

So a character that was fleshed out in an effort to get around the writer's block supplied more than one trip over it...actually, she pushed through it and kept a few other threatened ones at bay.

She was rewarded with her very own bouquet of blown up doctor's gloves.

Let's do one more. It is the weekend coming up and you didn't actually want to have to do any house cleaning or spring gardening, did you?

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4) THEME SONG or SOUNDTRACK

Ever get inspiration for a story from the words of a song? Does the rise and fall of action and emotion in a movie soundtrack get your imagination spinning? Mine responds to both. The act of listening to the specially chosen music can bring characters and setting or action clearly to mind for you to work with or simply mentally integrate yourself into the story, walking around watching your actors, rather like you were a ghost they can't see but can sense.

But can it get you over that writer's block wall? Sometimes.

Personally, I like instrumentals for the most part, although if I know the words to the song being played, I might sing them under my breath. At times they give me an idea. (Actually A WEEK 'TIL THE WEDDING began with something in the lyrics from a song off one of Sting's CDs and MR FAR FROM PERFECT worked the song that brought it all to mind into the story itself – they danced to it and the hero used some of the lyrics as his battle call, so to speak.) At others it is the emotional reaction I get from the arrangement. My writing “mix” tends to go heavy on movie soundtracks (lots of rise and fall sort of set ups and usually no words to distract me...I began with James Bond soundtracks long, long ago before I was ever published and now have the Harry Potter, Pirates of the Caribbean, SHERLOCK HOLMES and DOCTOR WHO ones as staples) and soft jazz pianos and saxophones. Your taste in music and what it can twist your imagination into doing is going to be as individual as your manuscript should be.

But when stuck, put in some music, let the mental credits roll, and see what your characters might be doing in the movie version of the book. You might get a different feel for things and, let's face it, a movie rarely follows the book so you might get some new ideas for those next scenes by watching pictures flicker on the mental scene in sync with the soundtrack.

If they try to head in the same direction that landed you at the foot of the wall, distract them. Say, “oh, look! A bunny!” or something. With luck that will show that there is another path through the story underbrush that had gone unnoticed before. Follow it. If it leads back to the wall, get off it. Even the Great Wall of China has gates in it and with new idea, you could set fire to the door if they won't open to your polite knock.

The main thing here is to let the music inspire you, paint new pictures in your mind, new episodes.

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And we are calling it quits her today.

Your challenge is pack a picnic lunch, spread out the blanket at the foot of the wall, even lean back against it and try one of the above ideas: the bouquet of doctor's glove balloons, the new POV, or listening to the soundtrack to your story. Report back which you feel might help the most.

Otherwise, see you on Monday.

Beth

Lecture #3

Sometimes the trouble is we need to change the way we were thinking about our story originally. Need to take it in a different direction.

Oh, it doesn't have to go far off the beaten path. Sometimes it's just a case of having something that wasn't working out as well as we'd hoped and it needs to be tweaked or altered a bit. If tossing it out entirely wouldn't "hurt" the story, perhaps that's the answer. Even if you loved it.

The mantra is "what is good for THIS story?"

And having said that, let's move into how we might do that tweaking or cutting or whatever it takes to move the story – and YOU – ahead on the page.

5) BRAINSTORMING: THE "WHAT IF"

We've all heard that "what if" is the phrase to lead a writer into story creation. But how about "what can make things worse for this character?" (This is what I've been trying to do this month myself as the current WIP comes to a close.)

My mother once asked me why I did such terrible things to my heroine. I told her it was because it had to be something that would push her to do what she might not do otherwise, and that meant it had to be terrible or she would have an option and I couldn't let her have an option.

You can't either when it comes to your storyline. Characters get cocky enough within a few chapters and try to take over. Sometimes they are right, but sometimes they aren't.

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When in plotter mode, you can't let them have their way without a good reason because YOU NEED a good reason for the things you do to them.

Therefore, what will it take to motivate them in the direction you need them to go? How can you keep what they desire just out of reach or dash their hopes for reaching a goal or winning a battle or a heart – at least until the final chapter of the story. What kind of complication can you create?

It's those complications that keep things moving.

Let's go beyond the "what if" and add WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHEN, WHY, and HOW to the equation. Have they all been answered? If not, there you go – answer them.

Go into more detail on your backstory for your own benefit...it doesn't necessarily need to go in the book, but it will give you more information on what went before that influenced, even indirectly, the events in your story. And the more your characters settle in, the more willing they should be to tell you things they didn't earlier about their past. Perhaps they've learned to trust you?

I have a friend who once told me she was stuck. Her villainess was sitting in a bubble bath while she plotting the heroine's fall but the scene was finished and all she knew was that the villainess needed to move from the tub into another scene at another location but she had been staring at the monitor for what felt like forever and hadn't a clue how to get her there. I said, "maybe the phone could ring and whoever called her could be telling her to meet them at that other location because they had information this character might be interested in learning." My friend slapped her forehead (writers can be dramatic sorts off the page, too) and said, "why didn't I think of that? It's so simple!"

It was simply a "what if" suggestion. They don't have to be involved. They can be simple, too.

6. THE BIBLE ACCORDING TO YOU

When I got the job to write YA books based on the SAVED BY THE BELL television show, I was picking up the written series at book #16. Someone else had written the fifteen titles before this but because the author's name was a pseudonym worn by anyone writing one of the SBTB books, readers wouldn't know that. This meant I needed to know what had been in those previous books. The publisher sent me a combination of published titles and yet to be published manuscripts written by my predecessor. What I used them for was

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to create my own SBTB Bible.

In other words, I needed sacred tenants that couldn't be broken. Some of them were dictated by the TV program itself, of which I watched ever episode I could catch, which considering it was in reruns on a number of different cable channels after school (this was in the mid 1990s) meant I watched an average of 90 minutes of SBTB each day, taking notes the whole time.

Things I noted both in the books and on the show were: students names and their connection to a particular story line, scams Zack pulled, things Jessie stressed over, what Screech's favorite things were, what sort of clothes Lisa favored, and who were all of Kelly's siblings and what did everyone's parents do for a living?

It went further. I had the names of teachers and what they taught and what they monitored or mentored, the names of restaurants in the town, shops, parks, beaches – anywhere the six characters that had to appear in every manuscript might go or have gone or be likely to revisit.

Why? Because I could use them again. I had some built in options to explore. And I could still create more characters, more situations. BUT, and it was all in capital letters, I had to stay within the narrow confines of the show's guidelines. All stories took place within the school year and it was always their senior year. Things had to be vague enough that a story wasn't limited to a particular part of the school year...therefore, while on the program they might have a Halloween or Homecoming show and move toward graduation, I needed to duck and weave around those. They belonged to the program, not the book series.

Which was a shame because holidays and special events do come in so handy at times.

Where a self-written bible would come in handy for moving ahead in your own manuscript though is if you create a town that characters from more than one storyline live in, or are working on a series and need to keep track of things to use again.

With my SBTB bible, I had a binder and tabs and punched holes in paper if I'd run out of the lined and punched paper we all used in school. It came in handy for this project. I had a tab just for Zack, one for Kelly, one each for Jessie, Slater, Screech and Lisa. I had one for teachers, parents, coaches, performers. Another broke down into one page what had happened in the earlier books, giving what each character did in it. Another tab was all about the town, with the names of streets, parks, beaches, entertainments, restaurants, shops. This binder contained all I needed to know and access about the Saved By The Bell World.

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I've been building new Bibles lately, for my OWN worlds this time. One for a mystery series and one for a fantasy one. I'll need to know a lot of things that are repeated in future books, but the time to build the bible is now as I create the world in which these series will operate.

However, you don't have to have a series or linked books to use a "bible". You can have one for a single book to remind you of things. In a way, it is similar in this regards to the Piecemeal idea, but organized differently.

A bible would be handy if you want to write Highland based historical romance, to keep track of things like the landscape or costuming or historical events, or various members of various clans, the names of fortified homes, layouts of fortified homes, weapons, dances, meals, drinks, songs, legends, enemies, and whatever you find you need could be quite compactly gathered this way. And if you are building a world far, far away in another galaxy, same thing applies. In fact, you'll have done so much world building – creating religions, political situations, social situations, legends, histories, families, languages, food and drink, animals, landscapes, ways to travel or communicate...and even more just in the first 100 pages, it would be much easier to find it all through the use of a binder rather than the more minimal reminders found with Post-It notes or a search and find of your manuscript.

Another way you might use a bible is simply to keep track of what other writers in a particular field have done and are currently doing in their stand alone titles. If the Tudors and the members of their courts have been on the shelves a lot lately, you might have gone back to the Plantagenets or forward to the Stuarts to give yourself better odds of being picked up. Or if the market is flooded with serial killers or just serial killers of a certain type, knowing this and seeing the Number of such themes might have you reconsidering some plot elements, again to make your book different from the many, many similar books editors have been working with.

And if you haven't thought out all the various things yet, well, perhaps adding another layer to your fictional civilization, whether related to an Earth era or one in a colony along Orion's Belt, is your next step forward in your current WIP.

Now, how does this equate to getting around that Writer's Block?

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Go back over everything you've gathered. Is there something that you considered using and then didn't work into the game plan or forgot about when you were putting things together? Is there a bit of information that hasn't been fleshed out that might work well or supply another idea that would be just perfect at this point?

I'm always finding things that I overlooked or meant to use and then got distracted and didn't.

And if none of this helps, try...

7. FORK IN THE ROAD

This is related to the Brainstorming What Ifs in a way. Your storyline has progressed on a certain path but suddenly there is a fork in the road – two different ways you could take the tale. Which is the right one? Take one of the paths and if it comes to nothing, go back and tread down the other. And if it peters out too, then go back to the junction and hack a trail of your own through the underbrush. Go down a nearly overgrown animal track. Doing something entirely different, entirely unexpected might make the story not only easier to tell, but a better story in the end.

In fact, let's go a step further. Don't head toward the next scene – particularly one you're having trouble getting around that wall to --without having three different paths that could be followed. There's always the Easy Path, the Slightly Uncomfortable Path, and the Life Changing-oh-myGod-I-could-die (or I'm-so-unsure-of-my-way)-on-this Path. Guess which one would be the more exciting.

Shall we make it easier first before we complicate things?

Path #1 is the way the character was heading when this stupid wide, tall, thick, unclimbably sheer surface slammed up in front of them making it impossible to move forward. Path #1 just isn't going to work for us.

Path #2 – what shall we make it? How about the exact opposite of what it was? If your character was headed toward the girl he loved, distract him. Have him see her smiling that special smile at someone else, have her brothers surround him and beat him to a pulp, tie him up, put him on a transport out of town with no money in his pockets. Have her wealthy father, uncle, grandfather, guardian wave an incredibly large check before his face saying it's his if he breaks things off with her. Have his boss offer him a promotion that will take him

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far, far away and say they prefer employees who aren't married or emotionally attached to anyone or who have any familial responsibilities to distract them and since he's an orphan they thought he was perfect for the job.

It's got to be something that he either has no control over that happens to him or is a decision that he has to make and a tough one at that.

Path #3 – something simple changes. He meets another girl along the road. He has all this time to think and remembers what her family is like and how she sometimes doesn't seem as interested in him as she is in everyone else around them. He gets passed over for promotion. Her relatives ask him for a loan of \$100, which he can't afford and...well, you get the idea? Could be it's something very, very simple.

Of course, you can also have Path #4 – the Wrath of Mother Nature. An earthquake happens, a tsunami follows, a volcano erupts, a flood or tornado or hurricane or a blizzard keeps him for getting where he needs to get which gives other people and situations time to develop that he has to combat or deal with or...whatever. Or he could be pacing before the Writer's Block wall, slip on a banana peel the last character left while waiting for the miracle idea that would get him past the barricade, slip, fall, brain himself on the wall, die because he's the only one around and you get to shelve the story or shove it under the bed and attempt an entirely different story.

Oh, I suppose you don't want that to happen, huh? Too many projects already in that holding pattern?

Then let's start coming up with all the paths this character COULD take until the right one pops up!

It will. You just have to find the right method to give it birth. We'll have more time in the birthing ward on Wednesday.

In the meantime, pick one of the suggested methods above and take it out for a spin. See what you can come up with and let us all know how the test drive felt.

Later.

Beth

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Lecture #4

Fingers flexed? Brains fired up on caffeine or creative juices? Then let's continue working our way through the ways you might manage to clobber that writer's block!

8. CHINESE MENU

You've come up with a lot of options that you could take – or if you haven't it's time to do so! List them in columns. The heroine could do this or this or that or even another thing. The hero could have similar choices, but tailored to his own past and goals, etc. Ditto the antagonist or other characters. Now go back and pick one from column A (heroine), one from column B (hero), and two from column C as long as they deal with different characters. Circle them. Then create a new list of items dealing with those choices and giving yourself lots of options. After awhile you're moving ahead or at least have a better idea of where you're going.

Sure, you could get incredibly lost, too, but this is about idea generation to work your way around that wall and the more ideas you explore, the sooner you'll find the pole to vault over the wall, the secret tunnel or the shovel to dig a tunnel under it, or a path or two that lead around it.

You don't have to follow what turned up in this first found of possible choices. You can always make another selection. If the new direction just doesn't sit well with you, even if it will get you writing again, don't take it. We're going with gut feeling here. I've written 40 or more pages in the wrong direction in the past and had to back WAY up to where I'd gone off track. Sometimes it was to get around a bit of writer's block, but not always.

Let's face it, if the Chinese menu can't supply what you crave for your story, you move on or make another choice. After all, they might have been out of sweet and sour chicken today, but they do have lemon chicken!

9. 500 WORDS AT A TIME

When I decided to leap into the National Novel Writing Month challenge, I knew I needed a plan. Well, the plan wasn't to have the whole story worked out because then I never would have finished the novel I was challenged to write. But a plan doesn't have to depend on what happens in the whole story sometimes. When it comes to details or exact scenes, it can be to move ahead in small increments, those counted by either words or pages.

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To duck the bullets of writer's block one does need to know what is going to be on those pages before starting. But the whole storyline in detail? No need. Actually, while plotters love working this way, it drives Pantsers insane, deprives them of the spontaneity of creation on which they thrive.

What I use is a "game plan", something that is just a line or two to tell me what point I should be in which chapter...sort of like a triptik for a vacation road trip. You've got the map and it says that to reach Yellow Stone you need to go in this direction and then stay over night around (and pinpoint the town or city) this spot, then start out and go in this direction and have a stop at...etc. etc. The details of what you are going to put on each day, what you're going to eat, what places you might visit en route, what souvenirs or postcards will be purchased, and all that are the things you don't decide until you need to.

That's what this 500 words is all about.

My plan during National Novel Writing Month called for inching ahead 500 words at a time for a total of 1500 words a day or over that. This meant I only needed to think a short distance into the story – less than 2 pages at a time if I did it three times a day.

What I did was 1) decide what would happen in the first 500 words the next day while getting ready for bed; 2) decide what the second 500 words would involve by lunch; and then 3) decide sometime during the afternoon about what the final 500 words would entail. Then I wrote all three sections before calling it a night. Fortunately, I'm a night person and find I write best once the sun goes down. If you're a morning writer, just shift the time of day you do your 500 words at a time planning.

This helps in regards to breaking your writer's block by giving you small chunks to consider rather than a large wall. You can do idea generation over an expanded length of time, all within a single day, and still get something written.

And think about all the various ways you can dream up new ideas. Or use the idea of the travel plan for the day, moving your characters across the landscape of the story itself. If that means making appointments for them to meet and discuss things with other characters or that you'll be driving them into an action sequence, great! With a 500 word goal you can work out the details you want in this snippet of the story, then move to the next snippet. Little by little you'll have chipped away enough to make the writer's block wall crumble at the slightest touch.

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And if this works well once, why not repeat the process throughout the entire writing process?

Once the 1500 words (or whatever your goal is) for the day has been reached, return back to planning what the first 500 words for the next day will be about. Before you know it, you'll have worked your way through writing an entire book. I managed nearly 52,000 words in November when the goal for the program is just 50,000 in those 30 days. I think it was the most I've written in such a short period of time ever! Of course, there was still polishing and expanding to do, but I did have a complete story written and had worked my way around the normal run of writer's block hurtles in medal winning time, too!

10. GROUP BY THREES

And speaking of dreaming up elements in increments of three at a time, let me point out that this system can be used for other things as well. Not limiting it to a measly 500 words each time but expanding it to still fall into elements of three.

It could be a way to set up chapters, breaking each into three POVs or scenes. It could be as simple as the opening of a scene, the middle of one, and the closing of it. Could be the interaction between characters, either with three of them in a scene or it could relate to two characters and the problem or event they are dealing with in the scene.

Grouping things in threes is something that is done in the art world, in interior design, in music, well, nearly any creative endeavor. It has balance. It's the sound of the gun at the beginning of the race, the race itself, and crossing the finish line.

By taking a larger scene and breaking it down into three separate, but not necessarily equal, parts, you can concentrate on rounding each one out better, probe it for its full potential, expand it, improve it.

And it also gives you some wiggle room in regards to those writer's blocks. Knowing that you can step into another character's POV or a different scene – and knowing which ones are logically available in the sequence of the story – cuts down dither time. Well, I've had "dither" time when I didn't have this idea of deconstructing things into three parts.

Finding ways around writer's block is all about generating new ideas and/or coming at things from a different direction. If a scene isn't working well in the originally planned POV, perhaps it will work in another character's POV. Perhaps you've lingered too long in one setting and need to be off elsewhere in the story where the going is easier. Try to stay within

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sequence though because if you write something that won't occur until chapters later, sometimes it doesn't fit as well as you thought it would. Things change in manuscripts. If they didn't your muse wouldn't be earning their keep, right? Even plotters can have a sudden insight that will make them change something they thought was engraved on their stone outline – if they are 110% plotters, that is.

The act of creating a tale well told isn't academic, it isn't totally logical even though the story must run in a manner that is logical. Storytelling is fluid, magical, changeable. If it wasn't, everyone could do it...and everyone can't.

At least not as we do with characterization, pathos, adventure, and everything else that goes into our stories. So when the story in question has dug in its heels, come to an abrupt halt, there's a reason. Unfortunately, we have to figure out what the reason is and nullify it. Hopefully one of today's suggestions will help. Worth a shot?

CHALLENGE!

Look at the wall you're standing before in your WIP...or the last one you ran up against before finding a way to scurry around it. Now back up a bit and consider the scene that moved smoothly prior to writer's block hitting. See if one of the suggested ways around it would have worked more quickly than what you finally did do.

Or see if what you did do fits into what was suggested today. I can claim to be the only writers who has dreamed up ways to keep dreaming the story onto a printed page.

“See” you next week when we pick up at idea number eleven! Beth

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Lecture #5

Ready for a new batch of ideas on how to get over the wall, under the wall, around the wall, or blast the frelling thing to pieces (yes, I just slipped a FARSCAPE word in there)? Then read on!

11. BERSERKER MUSE

Get your Muse kitted up for battle – Viking style. You are going to send them in to raid, loot, pillage, rape, and take captives from legends, fables, fairytales, mythology, classic literature, songs, poems, portraits, other types of paintings, photographs, plays, even into the sciences for possible scenarios.

Oh, you could call it borrowing but we know what it really is – helping ourselves. We’re not talking plagiarism here, no, it’s merely picking and choosing from things that have been around for years...sometimes hundreds or thousands of them...and updating, changing the setting, the era. Envisioning what Mount Olympus would be in the corporate world, what Cinderella’s life would be in Gilgamesh’s epic, rewriting a tried and true formula (Hansel and Gretel meet the aliens from V.)

If you saw THE BROTHERS GRIMM with Matt Damon and Heath Ledger, you know what I’m talking about. Read James Joyce’s ULYSSES? Same thing. KINGS, the TV series starring Ian McShane? You got it, a rewrite/take off of a far, far older tale, this one Biblical.

What others have done, well – open season, I say. You don’t have to use the whole thing. In fact, it’s better if you don’t. But plunder an element, a scenario, then give it your own spin. Are we on to something, or what?

The trick here is to see what you already have in your story and then match it up with something someone had used before somewhere. Let’s face it, if you are facing writer’s block while just dreaming up the storyline it’s going to be quite different than if you are deep into the story and know what is supposed to come next but have that stretch between where you are now and where you need to get that appears to have a raging flood cutting you off from making it over there successfully.

If you adore Nora Roberts’ work, sit back and say “what would Nora do?” Run the different scenarios she has used quickly through you mind and see if there is one that with a tweak of your own might bridge that flooded ravine that has you stranded.

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Like Steven Spielberg movies or Guy Richie's? How would they storyboard their way over? Could be you need to access a number of various scenarios and decide which would work best, but you are raiding books, movies, even the lives of friends and co-workers to get where you need to be.

It doesn't have to be much of a raid. Just swipe one little idea.

Let's say I have a character who is at a blind alley of their own. They were at the scene of a crime and before your writer's block rose up, were hiding in a closet after realizing that they aren't alone, that chances are the sound they heard was the murderer who obviously is not going to want to be seen so your character can pick them out of a lineup later on. How is your character going to get out of this spot?

Beserker Rules: anything from anywhere is fair game as long as you tweak it slightly from the original. Here are the options: 1) In an episode of DOCTOR WHO the Doctor took a windup mouse toy out of his jacket pocket and let it take off across a room to bump into something, causing whichever alien he and his companions were trying to evade to look in a different direction while they scuttled away; 2) Hermione Granger had a time turner that allowed her to go back in time to do something as long as she didn't run into herself (HARRY POTTER AND THE PRISONER OF AZKABAN); 3) Julie Andrews slid under a bed to escape notice in THOROUGHLY MODERN MILLIE, as did David Niven in the original PINK PANTER while in the same movie Robert Wagner hid behind the shower curtain in the bathtub then beneath a pile of bubbles as Capucine took a bath.

If I took more than the time it took to type these I'd come up with better ideas, but let's say I'm on a tight schedule and don't have days or hours to muse about this. I need to get around that wall.

This character isn't going to fall back on places where they might get caught like under the bed or behind a shower curtain and no one is filling a bathtub. But then I knew I couldn't use the same thing here anyway. What this is supposed to do is give me the chance to look around the room (from cracking the door open slightly) and see what other opportunities might be offered because if the killer looks in the closet, they're a gonner...and obviously the killer heard them come in.

This story doesn't have any magic in it so even if we had a time turner that wouldn't help, but perhaps if we back up we can revise our way into this scenario. Don't give the currently hiding character a key to the front door, don't leave it slightly open. Have them knock on the door, bang on the door, then go around the house to see if the backdoor is open, or if it's an

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apartment without a backdoor, have them return to their car as they get the cell phone out, and look up at the house. Yeah, you're giving the culprit time to get out and not be seen, so that might not fit for what you need, but you considered changing the sequence of the timing here.

Now, what was that first scenario? The one with the windup mouse? Something simple to distract the perp. Character searches pockets. Finds: loose coins, Swiss army pocket knife, small travel alarm, half of a movie ticket, a golf tee, and an individual size packet of aspirins. What would MacGyver do? He always managed to gather up a bunch of unrelated items and build something. That's too complicated and the character is in a closet. Let's go with The Doctor's far simpler solution but make it two part. Let's set the travel alarm (carefully hiding the LCD glow in one of the hanging items in the closet) so that it will go off in 90 seconds or slightly longer and slide it outside the closet door or in the pocket of something in the closet. Now take the Swiss Army knife and find the spoon (I have no idea if they have this feature but THIS one does!) and open it. Stick either a coin or the golf tee in it and catapult it across the room to hit the wall...in a direction you don't want your character to scuttle, of course. Now hastily get them over behind the sofa or large armchair soundlessly as possible. Yes, the bad guy then whips around but when the alarm near the closet goes off, he automatically looks that way, allowing your character a brief chance to get either where the guy has already searched or out the door.

Or shot in the back as they go out the door. Whichever.

The idea here was to show that you can borrow and recreate and backtrack and try something else. The point is that you NEED to be moving and borrowing ideas that have either happened in other works or building on a simple idea will get your character moving forward once more.

And our final idea for today...

12. DECEPTIVELY LETHAL

Make the small dangerous and the large gentle. A baby's smile, laugh, cry, clutch can be more deadly to a big tough guy who melts at such unconditional trust than a dipped in poison barb or dart. Likewise, the same small, seemingly insignificant thing could be physically fatal, too.

In one of Jim Butcher's Harry Dresden books, our PI wizard is up against some hit guys hired

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by one of his Unseelie enemies – in this case, the hit “man” is the largest of the Billy Goats Gruff. But when Harry bests him, another of the BGGs arrives, a slightly smaller one and it’s tougher to best him, yet Harry pulls it off. However, the third of the BGG brothers arrives, a really small guy and he’s the toughest of the three to beat.

In Kate Griffin’s Matthew Swift series, Swift gathers his magic from the modern city, using bits of light, the static of computer screens, the repeated runs of the underground trains, of the scuff of many shoes up stairs, of elevators...all small things that are gathered, consolidated, for the power they wield, which is a switch on the idea that magic comes from nature as well as the lethal properties of small things.

Unexpected things can also fall into this category. Because the urban fantasy series seem extremely capable of harvesting these sort of ideas, let’s return to Butcher’s hero who has a handy army of pixies armed with plastic handled box cutters. Or Kim Harrison’s Rachel Morgan series with Jenks’s large family of lethal pixie children. In Griffin’s work, even the tiny fairies of the city have evolved into creatures with cellophane clothing, aluminum wings and wire nails/claws for ripping into their enemies.

You don’t have to be an urban fantasy writer to look for the smallest thing that could take someone down. A tear is enough when shed at the right moment. And if you’ve got a mighty Alpha hero, perhaps that is just the sort of thing to bring him down. A cold germ would level him nicely if your heroine feels up to playing nurse.

And we’ll leave things there today and rejoin the war on that Writer’s Block on Wednesday.

It’s been fairly quiet out there so don’t forget that questions, comments, suggestions, and ideas of your own are welcome at all times. Later! Beth

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Lecture #6

Ready for the next batch of ideas? These can give your muse a nudge whether you're still working out what will happen in your story or if you're smacked into the wall. Depends on what you need but I do urge that you give each one a try. Sometimes they work better for one story but not at all for another one. Still...

13. CAT BURGLAR

Steal characters. Yep, you heard me. Steal characters. Once they are in the public domain, repurpose characters created by others. People do it all the time with Sherlock Holmes. There are a host of short stories written in the style of the original Holmes tales but with twists – recently I read one where Watson stepped through a dimensional gate on his way back to Baker Street in the fog and found another highly intelligent man living at 221-B who kept an ear to the streets to discover what his nemesis was up to – in this case the gentleman occupying the Baker Street digs was Professor James Moriarty and the evil villain was one Sherlock Holmes.

An excellent example of what can be done with someone else's character is Laurie R. King's Mary Russell/Sherlock Holmes series. All but the earliest of these are set in the 1920s when Holmes is in his 50s, but still at the top of his game, and Russell begins as his apprentice when yet in her teens and grows in abilities to become his partner – and wife.

Do you HAVE to use someone else's creation in stealing a character? Certainly not. You can steal the character's traits, talents. In a way the lead character in PSYCH and MONK share traits with Holmes...they spot the things other overlook and put the pieces of the puzzle together based on these clues.

Need an unfaithful wife model? How about Emma Bovary? A group of guys in the military who do everything together? Ever hear of the THREE MUSKETEERS?

And if you don't want to steal a character, about an element from one of the classics. It's almost the same as the Berserker Muse, but with a twist.

Let's face it, what makes one story different from another is all in the "twist."

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14. BLIND LIBRARIAN

What else would you call it when a juxtaposition such as proper Regency era characters from a classic end up interacting with Zombies? Didn't SENSE AND SENSIBILITY AND SEA MONSTERS follow PRIDE AND PREJUDICE AND ZOMBIES?

Only a sight impaired librarian would have ever put such things on a shelf next to each other. Or the strange mind of a writer. The idea was just quirky enough to land on the best seller lists, wasn't it?

Next time you're at the library, maybe you should close your eyes and wonder around choosing book ideas by the feel of the tome rather than the subject matter, and then create from whatever you blindly choose.

Or, blindingly take a book down off the shelf and let it fall open where it will. Read what you find before you and see if there is something there to give you inspiration.

Stranger things have happened.

All that might work well if you're still plotting, but what if you're in the middle of your book and get the feeling that you've been blindfolded, asked if you'd like a final cigarette, then backed up against a wall and the only sound you hear is the cocking of rifle hammers. Okay, so that's a bit ancient sounding, but I write historicals. And it's a far more dramatic picture, isn't it? Besides, we're trying to dodge the writer's block bullet here.

So how will the blind librarian help you in mid story when writer's block strikes? By reminding your muse that just because you originally liked the idea of the sound of those rifle hammers cocking, that there are other ways to execute writer's block. You could throw knives at it, offer it a Harvey Wallbanger laced with hemlock.

Stop thinking about the way things have happened in all the other books you've read in the genre of your choice and consider how a character in a different genre might work out the problem or move toward the objective on the other side of the wall. If you've been writing romance, consider what fantasy or action-adventure might offer in the way of a solution. Should the story revolve around home repairs, rather than do some more swearing at a screw on a door hinge that won't come loose (as your character probably already has done some swearing at it – tame or not so tame swearing) the options could be 1) a Jackie Chan type comes along and gives the door a martial arts kick, 2) Thor, the Norse god of thunder, drops by and gives it a whack with favorite hammer, 3) Tim Allen from HOME IMPROVEMENT

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says he can handle it and the door falls off the hinge, squishing him flat, 4) the Tardis materializes in the yard and Doctor Who twirls his sonic screwdriver to give it the old time traveling alien touch, 5) a car jumps the curb and crashes into the house, demolishing the door, 6) a shaman arrives in a limo, gets out, does a dance to the accompaniment of a dried gourd shaking and his driver keeping time on the steering wheel, and chants with the result that the screw disintegrates into a fine powder of rush, or...

Or by this time your muse has had enough of the foolishness and comes up with a decent idea to give you a boost over the wall. Taking time for a bit of foolishness related to the problem has, if nothing else, took your conscious mind off the problem and let the subconscious do the necessary work.

15. EXTRAPOLATION

There are two ways to look at this: 1) the characters spell things out or the description does, or 2) a character's backstory and characteristics are milked for all they're worth.

They do this in the movies, don't they? Let's just go back to Holmes and look at what's been done to his mythic façade.

In *WITHOUT A CLUE*, Watson is the brain who deduces his way to a successfully concluded adventure but to hide his activities he hires an actor to play Holmes and feeds him lines as he plays the part – and, of course, the actor is nothing like Holmes otherwise. In fact, he's a bit of coward, a bumbler, and a womanizer. Ergo, the character of Sherlock Holmes has changed as has Watson's, yet they the team of Holmes and Watson plays out intact. The extrapolation then is in finding a new way to present the two characters.

If you think "talking" in regards to extrapolation, well, Holmes is the one who always spells out what happened, how a crime was committed, and how he came to solve it, after Watson has explained it all to him.

In the Golden Age of Mysteries the sleuth was always gathering everyone around the table and talking about all that had happened and making it appear each in turn was the culprit before coming to the true culprit's exposure. What this did was remind the reader of everything that had gone before, what had been discovered, how it tied together, and yet how it didn't tie together. Kept them turning pages in the book and on the edge of their seat at the movies.

In the most recent reincarnation of Holmes (played by Robert Downey Jr.), the deerstalker

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hat is gone and Holmes is more bohemian, as suits the character, too. But it is Watson who has been extrapolated into a new persona using the data Conan Doyle wrote of him (former military man and thus possible man of action and quick thinking) who is the personification of this method. This Watson is capable of deducing things from miniscule data nearly as well as Holmes is, just from associating with the consulting detective for a length of time.

Extrapolation is stretching things out, going into more detail. So why not find out what MORE could be done with your own characters? Is there something in their past that you haven't put to good use in the story yet? Could it possibly complicate things more? We can certainly hope so! It could be that you simply didn't outfit this character as fully as you thought. Would going back and giving them the talent needed, the tools needed, to surmount whatever is holding production up gain you some extrapolation magic?

With the stubborn screw of a plot problem, I might hand them a can of WD-40 or a high powered electric drill and not wait for outside help to arrive.

Back next week with more ideas, but in the meantime...

CHALLENGE! See if you can work around whatever writer's block wall you might be facing with one of these or just tell the rest of us how you might use one of the above ideas.

Back on Monday to begin our final week!

Beth

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Lecture #7

Here we are in our final week and we've still got some ideas to take for a test drive, so let's get started!

16. JOB JAR

This is, at first glance, quite similar to the Chinese Menu arena, but instead of having "columns" on a menu from which to choose, all the ideas and elements possible go into a virtual jar (or a physical one if you like) and are pulled out willy-nilly and simply used to create a written piece.

I'll admit, I used to make up stories for my stepsons when they were little in nearly this way. I'd ask them what sort of story they wanted and, being children, they'd be very specific about what they wanted included, but the elements rarely had anything in common. We once had a mystery story where missing homework, a monkey, a Koala bear, and the color blue were the elements they required. And I made up the story as it was required, immediately, of course.

If for no other reason, this idea could be used to force you out of a slump, or jumpstart the creative juices.

After all, aren't your dreams a conglomeration of elements picked from the jar of your memory then mixed with otherwise incompatible elements? Thought so. Mine sure are.

And they've sent me scribbling down ideas upon waking, too.

17. UNACCUSTOMED ROLES

It isn't just blind librarians who have mixed things up lately. What with the job market as it is, both Queen Victoria and Abraham Lincoln have become vampire and zombie hunters...at least they have on the book shelves.

Perhaps your characters need to have the sort of jobs or dispositions or whatever that are not usually associated with their genre or age or intellect or...well, even planet. No, your contemporary romantic hero doesn't have to clock in at the job to spend eight hours driving stakes into pesky vampires before returning home. He could run a daycare.

He could find that there are more than two ways to survive a situation – not just fight or

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flight but...well, you fill in the blank.

In Simon R. Green's Nightside series, it isn't his hero John Taylor who is the more deadly character, it is Shotgun Suzie.

18. BARGAINING WITH CHARACTERS I don't know about you, but I've had characters who wanted a bigger dressing room and a star on the door. They got bigger than the boots I'd bought for them. They wanted to be the main character, not the sidekick, the second rung player. It didn't matter to them that they didn't fit the job requirements for that particular story. They thought I should change it to fit their qualities.

Fortunately, I tend to already really, really like these characters, yet I do put my foot down. We have a heart-to-heart talk – mentally, of course – and I promise them a book of their own. A spin-off. Amazingly, they've liked the idea. I mean they get paychecks for both books, right?

I've had problems with other characters who balked at what they needed to do. Like the hero who'd been a minister and as much as I thought I'd talked him around to that required love scene, as much as he agreed he wanted it, he just couldn't go through with it. I'll admit I had to call my editor and whine that the book was going to be late coming in. When she asked what the problem was I said, "Kevin won't get in bed." She understood, bless her. So we went into bargaining with him and reached a compromise. We let the characters get married and had the love scene in the Epilog along with Christmas. Up until that time, the story hadn't had an epilog. In this case, the character won the round.

But didn't I mention before that sometimes characters have a better idea and a smart writer lets themselves be talked around occasionally?

It can go either way, but if your story hits the reinforced concrete wall over a disagreement with a character, sit down and talk it out with them. You can even do it audibly if it helps, just make sure there's no one else at home but you.

19. CLIMB OUTSIDE OF THE BOX

Yeah, I know. I hear you saying, but haven't ALL of these ideas been related to thinking outside of the box? Welllll, yeah, but this says CLIMB outside it!

So, when things aren't moving ahead, reevaluate the story. Is it too much like everything else

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out there? Are you writing it just because the market appears hungry for this type of story?

Once upon a time, back when I was unpublished, an agent said, “I can’t sell this story anywhere because it combines too many elements from different genres.” Fast forward to the present. We have romance, mystery, horror, magic, and comedy combined in many of the best selling urban fantasy stories. Not all that long ago there was no such thing as urban fantasy.

DRACULA was not a romantic hero but everywhere you turn there seem to be vampires who ARE romantic heroes. I understand demons are giving them a run for their money. Both being a twist on the ever alluring “bad boy” hero.

When historical romances from the pens of Kathleen Woodiwiss and Rosemary Rogers first hit the stands in the 1970s they startled readers because they had sex scenes! These are the stories that spawned the term “bodice rippers”, and they were! Move forward in time and the pendulum swings another way, to the prairie romance where innocence and faith win the day, and the dude if he’s considered worth keeping by tale’s end. Once upon a time no one would have thought Inspirational stories would ever sell.

Even the type of stories found in the Harlequin and Silhouette lines have changed over time. So when did this all happen? When an author climbed outside of the marketplace box and wrote such a moving or exciting story that an editor leaped aboard THEIR bandwagon rather than expect the writer to leap aboard the train of whatever was selling best at the time.

You don’t have to start a new subgenre yourself to have climbed outside of the box though. All you have to do is insert something that will surprise your reader, be they editor or fan.

And that is it for today. I’m not even giving a Challenge, though feedback and comments are always welcome. Back on Wednesday with our final group then it will be Q&A for the rest of the workshop.

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Lecture #8

We move into the last batch today.

20. NEVER NEVER LAND If your character says or thinks or has a problem with something, such as a fear of something, well guess what – make them do it or have to deal with.

“I am never, never going to get married again” – Bingo! It’s gonna have to happen in the story.

“Snakes, I hate snakes,” says Dr. Indiana Jones and does he have to deal with snakes...yep, in four different movies.

Make them do something that they have always stonewalled before, but do it for a really good reason. Back them into a corner so they have no option but to do the one thing they thought they’d never do.

Get the idea? If you haven’t worked that into a story, well maybe it’s about time!

21. REPRISÉ THE ROLE

Now this is easily understood if the tale you are writing is a Spin Off. Obviously characters who appeared in the earlier book...or earlier books if you’ve got a series going...can get a bit part. They might simply be the waitress at the restaurant who served other characters. They might be someone who was necessary in a different episode, whether in the same book or in a previous book in a series. Give ‘em a walk on or a bigger part than they had in the past or a part equal to what they had in the past.

In Jim Butcher’s latest Harry Dresden adventure CHANGES nearly anyone who has survived a previous book and been on his side or close enough to one his side is approached to help rescue the daughter he didn’t know he had from the vampire Red Court. It’s a lot of characters! You don’t need that many folks reprising their roles, but some could help you out in a spot.

22. PICK UP

No, this isn’t a really old trick. Think throwing cards in the air then pick five, eight, ten. Perhaps as many as you have chapters in mind.

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Of course first you have write something on these cards. I suggest things like LOVE SCENE, DECISION TO BE MADE, PLANS FALL THROUGH, INTRODUCE NEW SITUATION, INTRODUCE NEW CHARACTER...etc.

Think of these as the four suits in a regular deck of cards. You'll have four of each of these. You might even use the Red and Black feature as the Ying and Yang of the element. You'll need 13 elements, the 2 through 10 plus Jack, Queen, King and Ace (these are your elements) times four. If you want, put in a couple ringers – Jokers for 54 cards.

Once you have “drawn” your hand, see what you can come up with for the situation.

Do you need to do this before writing anything? Heck no! Do it when you need an idea. Drawing the card that says LOVE SCENE means that's what you write. Of course if you thought you were getting close to writing a love scene and drew a CHARACTER DIES card, well, you're just going to have to work with this new development. It would certainly give the story a twist!

23. GO FISH. Another variation on a lot of the idea generation we've already done. Need an idea for the next scene? Go fishing in the Berserker Muse model for what you need. Next time go fishing in the Fork in the Road. Then in Never Never Land, or Blind Librarian or...

24. MAKE SIMPLE THINGS SCARY/MAKE SCARY THINGS SIMPLE

In THE DOCTOR WHO series the writers love to take something we think is everyday or lovely and turn it into something evil: like store manikins that come to life and attack people or graceful, weeping angel statues in a cemetery and convert them into savage allies who can only move when you aren't looking directly at them...though it's a good idea not to make eye contact with any of them. You could be a gonner.

What about taking something that is perceived as scary and making it really nice. Say a big green ogre or a monster from the closet (SHREK and MONSTERS, both cartoon movies that showed these usually terrifying things as benign and rather cuddly.

25. TAKE THE EASY WAY OUT

How a wind up mouse in your pocket or a spilled cup of tea can make a world of difference.

Odd isn't it how we tend to look for the complicated answer? Could be the simplest solution

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will work far better. Have a character get a phone call, nearly get hit by a bus, get fired, get kissed. Kids think some of their teachers are monsters or aliens, so make the teacher one (Rick Riordan did in THE LIGHTNING THIEF, the first Percy Jackson and the Olympians tale). Not one of these things is convoluted – it's the easy way out.

Hopefully you've gotten some ideas of how to get around or over or under the writer's block wall that slams into place without warning and stops your furiously typing fingers to freeze – as well as your imagination.

I take each of these ideas out for a walk when stuck. Some work better one day and a different one another. But at least I have them to fall back on, to use as a battering ram, as aid to help me dodge those writer's block bullets when they come singing at me (never a happy tune, either!).

While my tally of ideas is done, I'll still be around to answer questions, comments, and what have you through the weekend, so post away. For the most part things have been fairly quiet out there. Time for you to take advantage of the time and drill me for ideas or offer suggestions on how to improve this workshop. I'm open to it all.

Beth

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