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## Plotting with Sherry Lewis Lecture 1

Each time I begin to explore a new craft topic, I find myself thinking that this skill (whether it's characterization, motivation, conflict, or something else) must surely be the most important skill you need to be a successful author. I'm thinking the same thing now as I begin this workshop. Surely plotting is Queen because the plot is the place where we tie everything else we do together. Here's where our characters meet conflict, where cause brings about effect, where tension, dialogue, sensory texture, and sexual tension all come together and where what we know about pacing is put to the test.

Of course, I think the same thing about revisions. And motivation. And characterization. And conflict. And the truth is, is, there is no ultimate skill. We have to know how to do them all, and perform them to the best of our ability in every project we undertake, if we hope to be successful in today's highly competitive marketplace.

But in this workshop, Plot is Queen.

No doubt you've heard debates over which is best --plotting in advance, or writing off into the mist. No doubt you have a preference. Almost everyone does. Although we can sometimes get into heated debates, we all know that there really is no right or wrong way. The important thing is to achieve the desired effect.

Whether you plot before you begin to write, as you begin each section of the book, or wake up each morning with no conscious idea of where you're going that day, we all plot. Even those who write into the mist plot in some way at some time, whether consciously or unconsciously, or they wouldn't end up with a story.

But let's begin at the beginning.... What is plot?

Plot is probably the most often-heard term when writers get together to discuss fiction. It's considered by most to be the essence of fiction. Without plot, there is no story. While some people begin with plot and seek people to enact it and others discover interesting people and discover plot by looking into their lives, plot is story.

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There are many definitions of plot floating around out there. It's an ordered structure of significant events, the story of strong forces meeting and one of them triumphing over the other for better or worse. It's a record of change.

Change, when inflicted on people, alters their fortunes, their thoughts, their beliefs --even if it's only long-held beliefs about themselves. And change is what readers come to the book to find. You'll never find a reader who picks up a book hoping that for 400 pages or so everything in the characters' lives will remain exactly as it was on page 1.

Plot is also a force upon the people in your story, often called narrative drive. This drive is the relentless forward movement of events, and details related to those events, that pile up until the whole teetering tower collapses into the final conflict --those climactic scenes that make the story worthwhile.

We need that force upon the people in our stories, again because readers don't come to the book to find out what happens in the life of someone who never experiences something beyond their control, never ends up with their back against the wall, or never has to fight their way out of a bad situation.

It's a rare person who will stick with a book about nice people to whom nice things happen over and over again until the end. In fact, as an author, I can't imagine how I'd know when to stop writing if the people in my book had nothing to conquer and nothing over which to triumph. Readers need plot --that relentless forward movement --to keep them hooked on the book. Authors need plot to know when and where to begin, and when and where to stop!

I'm often approached by confused writers who have no clear idea of how and when to begin the book they want to write, no clear idea where they're going, and no clue where to end. This is a horrible feeling. It leaves a writer feeling unequal to the task they're facing, which might be okay if they weren't driven to face it, tackle it, and conquer it--a mini-plot in itself!

We're all terribly afraid that our plots won't work and worried that we

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are the rare thing among writers --the one and only author who can't come up with a perfect plot.

Rest assured that there is no such thing as a perfect plot, but we're going to focus this month on creating plots that are as close to perfect as we're capable of creating --and, more importantly, plots that work. To quote Stella Cameron, "What doesn't work in a plot is what doesn't work. If the reader stops, frowns, re-reads, and stops again --there's something very wrong."

There may be different causes that bring about the pause. Perhaps the reader is thrown by the inadvertent loss of viewpoint control, or by slips in chronology, or by the author's failure to provide adequate pegs into the setting. Maybe the reader is thrown by what seems to be an illogical reaction or a decision no sane person would ever make. Or by reactions, situations, and decisions that are obviously contrived for the convenience of the author but have nothing to do with reality. Or, all too often, an inconsistency in plot.

Plot inconsistencies might simply give the reader an uneasy sense of unreality or implausibility. They may give her an I'm not sure feeling which pulls her out of the story and reminds her she's reading words on a page rather than living through something vicariously. Even worse, they may stop the reader cold by presenting something she knows is an impossibility. However those inconsistencies appear in the finished product, they are the result of careless plotting and made worse by the failure to double check or the delusion on the author's part that no one will notice.

So what are the key ingredients of plot?

Well, of course, we need an idea. I'm sure you've all had someone --and probably many someones --ask where you get your ideas. It's a natural question from those odd folks who can walk through an entire day without once thinking, "Hey! That would make a great story!" Those poor souls who have no alternate universes existing within their souls, and who don't hear voices in their heads. One thing that sets a fiction-writer's mind apart from the others is the way we process information that crosses our paths.

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Think about it and you'll know it's true. When was the last place you traveled somewhere new and didn't come home determined to set a story there? When was the last time you observed someone behaving strangely and didn't puzzle about it until you'd created an explanation? When was the last time you went out in public and didn't file away a snippet of conversation or a description of a person you observed to use later? When was the last time you noticed two people in the distance who were obviously arguing and didn't, even for a heartbeat, decide for yourself what they were arguing about?

I'm not saying that you stop what you're doing while this happens. We're perfectly capable of carrying on with our own lives while some piece of our brain notices, catalogs, concludes, and stores information for us. Our minds work differently from those of most people around us, but they work exactly as they were created to work.

Not everyone in the world can make themselves cry between one stoplight and the next while they unconsciously make up a complete, heartbreaking story for the couple of strangers they just passed on the street. Not everyone can see a sour-looking stranger waiting to cross the street and have a list of suspects ready to commit his murder before they've gone a mile.

But not everyone in the world is supposed to do that.

Don't fight it. Be what you are. Indulge your senses. Encourage your imagination. If you were created to write, then be a writer. Part of your job is to muddle. To think. To let your imagination run away with you. Gather information wherever you go, or you'll discover yourself writing the same locations, the same people, and the same situations over and over again.

But plot has to be much more than just an idea or a situation. Ideas are easy to come up with. Turning them into plot takes a bit more doing.

When you have a good idea and you're ready to begin plotting seriously, draw upon all that information you've stored away. Sort through your mind, your filing cabinets, your boxes, bags, drawers, photo albums.

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Through magazines, newspapers, notes you've made on the backs of envelopes and receipts, on napkins and in stray notebooks. Take a walk and observe people. And then get to work.

Plotting doesn't have to be hard. It is possible to create a plot from thin air. I know because I've done it over and over and over again in workshops over the years. I've walked into rooms cold, without any preconceived notions, and come away with several fully plotted books by the end of the workshop. I've helped other people plot their books, as well.

One of my favorites of the books I've written, is the result of a plotting workshop I conducted several years ago. *A Time to Dream* began life as the result of a conversation with one of my editors about the direction of my career. She said something about not wanting me to just write a romance and stick a ghost in it, but my brain didn't hear the word not, and I became determined to write a ghost romance.

I plotted that book during a workshop and submitted a proposal, only to discover that the ghost line was folding and my editor couldn't use the book. She suggested that I rework it as a time travel, which I did. Though *A Time to Dream* didn't turn out exactly the way we'd plotted it during that workshop, anyone who participated will tell you that the basics of the story remained unchanged. That is the beauty of strong plotting. Details can change, but if you draw a sound blueprint for your book, you can add and remove details without losing those elements that are important to you. *A Time To Dream* changed from a contemporary ghost story to an historical time travel. Zacharias and Agatha became living people instead of ghosts, and the modern-day Zack had to disappear, but the book remained a romantic story with a subplot about a troubled marriage and the search for something of great value that it was from the beginning.

I was able to change the outer shell of the book in relatively short order because I already knew what I needed to write in order to tell the story I wanted to tell, and I remained satisfied with the finished product because it was still my story, my people, my ideas underneath it all.

Another key element of plot is the inciting incident. We'll discuss where and when to begin in a little more depth later, but we'll also touch on it

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briefly here. A plot begins when the ordinary world of the viewpoint person (or people) is disrupted by some significant event. This event -- whatever it is -- jump-starts the story and then drives the story forward. Once it occurs, there is no turning back.

You must give the reader some reason why the story needs to take place and, even more important, why it needs to take place now, not last week, last month, last year, or even yesterday.

The protagonist is usually caught off-guard by this incident --the job loss, the reappearance of a husband presumed dead, the discovery of a spouse in bed with someone else, the car accident, the fire, the unexpected offer to purchase property, the death of a loved one, the death of a long-lost loved one . . . The list goes on and on. Our protagonists are propelled into action and forced to make decisions, and often those decisions are based on the need for self-protection.

The next element we need is, of course, people. Our plots focus on a person or group of people who are interesting enough to be worth following around for a while. I try not to refer to those people as "characters" (except by accident) because I'm becoming convinced that when books fail because of "character" it's probably because the writer has created "characters" who behave one-dimensionally rather than real people.

When we write characters, readers (editors!) don't feel the people come to life because they don't. They're propelled around on a stage of the author's making, performing in ways of the author's choosing, and making points the author wants to make. That's one of the things we'll work to avoid during this workshop.

And of course, when we're thinking plot, we'd be nowhere without conflict. The Golden Rule of Story is that only trouble is interesting. If you want your story to capture a busy reader's attention and hold it, your characters must be in trouble and get into more trouble as the story progresses.

Too often, we approach story with the subliminal idea that our job is to immediately "fix" the focal person's world. He begins life unhappy,

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unmarried, separated from his family, from his children. She begins the story arguing with her daughter, nursing a sick parent, digesting the news that her friend is ill, and we set about trying to make the world a nice place for this person to live.

This problem is, sadly, more common for women who write than for men. As women, we tend to see a person stranded in the top of a tree and ignore the time-honored code of fiction --to put the person up a tree and then throw rocks at them. While male authors get busy throwing rocks, our natural instinct is to trot over to the tree carrying a ladder to help her down.

During this workshop we're going to put our ladders away, lock them in the shed, and practice throwing rocks.

Even if we don't consciously rush in to fix the world, we often let it ride along at the same level of anxiety from beginning to some future point near the end when we begin to fix it. So even if we don't make it better, neither do we make it worse.

Take a few minutes to think about the current project you're working on. Think about past projects --especially those you've submitted to an editor without success. What's the status quo when the story begins? Now look at what happens in the story. How are you making the situation better? How do you make it worse?

If necessary, make two lists on a page --those plot points you include which make the situation worse, and those which make the situation better. You may be surprised to learn that your natural tendency is to fix the world for your poor, unfortunate characters, or to let their world ride along at the same stage of anxiety for too long.

To create a plot that will hold the reader's attention from beginning to end, we need to begin at the tip of the iceberg, not at the summit, not on the downhill slope. We begin at the tip and then we force them go across the iceberg, not around. We make them face every dangerous moment as they traverse the obstacle in their way; we don't lessen it. We don't send help. We don't toss them a rope.

Begin with what each of the people in your story wants. Make sure it's

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something they can't acquire easily. Something they can't ask another person for. Something they can't buy.

Make sure they want something. It took me a long, long time and several unsuccessful books to realize that a character who doesn't want something is next to impossible to motivate without putting him in contrived situations.

Make sure it's something they want so badly, they'll do almost anything to get it. Make it something they ache for. Something they have to get or they'll be doomed to a deep, eternal unhappiness, a passionless existence, or maybe even death.

Do you recoil from that concept? Think it's too extreme? You want to write about simpler things. Stakes that aren't quite so high. Passion that's a little less . . . passionate. Wants that are less earth-shaking, less life-altering.

But do you really?

If the people you're writing about aren't one-hundred percent committed to pursuing their goals, they're going to be too easily discouraged when things get rough. They're more likely to back down, turn away, give up, move on, shift goals, and go after something else until things get rough. If they keep plugging away when they're not fully committed, their reactions will feel unrealistic and contrived.

You must write about people who are completely committed. Passionate people who are willing to fight for what they want and keep going after it in the face of obstacles, right or wrong, wise or foolish. Just keep your idea in view, your motivation appropriate, and the people in your story behaving in character.

And a word of warning: Characters who want to achieve a negative goal, to avoid something, to prevent something, to run from something, also make for unworkable (or very tough) fiction. If you create a man who wants, for example, specifically, to not fall in love, anything you put into your plot that forces him to fall in love is likely to feel contrived. Why would a person who truly wants to avoid the opposite sex open the door, even a little, for that perky heroine you've just shoved under his nose?

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People who want "negative goals" (to create an absence of something in their lives) dig in their heels and refuse to move. Moving them requires you, the author, to lie, and readers can always, always, always feel a lie, even if they can't identify it as one.

Instead, let him want something that gets him moving forward. He's accepted the fact that he won't find love again, but he wants desperately to regain the respect he once had. Because he wants a positive, he may reluctantly open the door for that perky heroine as a means to the end he seeks.

Avoiding negative goals sounds pretty simple when I write it this way, but it's probably the most profound thing I know about writing, and it's made a huge difference in my work since I finally figured it out.

Remember also that trouble is story. Opposing wants cause trouble. The people in your story must have the potential to stop each other from achieving what they want along with the potential for healing their broken spirits and fulfilling their wants.

We're going to spend this workshop creating a plot so I can use it to illustrate the points I'd hope to make. Let's begin with a couple of people. I'm going to look into the idea file I keep on my computer. I keep it there to make note of those one-line ideas that come along to distract me while I'm working toward a deadline. Once I have them down and saved, I can put them aside and get back to the book I've committed to.

At some point along the way, I made these two notations:

A heroine who takes a sailboat cruise in Maine to escape the pressure.

A hero who is a rent-a-husband.

So let's begin with that. It's almost nothing. I have no preconceived notions about what kind of pressure the heroine is escaping, or why the hero is a rent-a-husband. But step-by-step, trusting the process, we can turn this into a workable plot.

What does my heroine want? To escape the pressure, obviously <g>. But

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what kind of pressure is she running from? Job pressure? Family pressure? Some other kind of pressure? I don't know yet, but I will. I only know that it has to be big enough to keep her running even when things get bad --and things will get bad!

My plot will build by adding complications to her story, by dropping bombshells and surprises developments, by introducing new elements that increase tension and keep the story moving forward. Plots aren't drawn in a straight line. Real people don't move from Point A to Point B without detours, zigzags, dead ends, sidetracks and wrong turns. Neither should the people in your stories.

Each element adds more obstacles, offers more decisions to be made and more paths for the people in your story to choose. At each turn, chaos, disorder, arguments, struggles, bewilderment, dilemmas should result.

So am I going to send my new heroine sailing off from Kennebunkport toward a calm, peaceful vacation during which she can unwind and set aside the stress of her current situation? Not if I want to sell the book.

Now, admittedly, different genres lend themselves more readily to certain kinds of disaster. Even within a genre, readers of a certain line, imprint, or sub-genre may readily accept certain plot twists and others may reject them.

Within the romance world, authors of single title books have a broader field of choices than do the authors of short category books --and yet even within the world of category, the stories must be about people with something real at stake. Even those readers who want a "milder" read aren't eagerly standing in line waiting to shell out their hard-earned dollars for a book about someone whose biggest decision is whether to vacuum today or tomorrow.

If you'll take a close look, I think you'll find that what separates category from single title isn't subject matter as much as tone. Both Jurassic Park and the children's TV show Barney are about dinosaurs, but the tones and the treatment of the subject matter are very different. And please don't anyone get the wrong idea. I am not comparing any book in any genre to

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Barney <g>. I'm simply choosing the most extreme example I can think of to illustrate my point.

Because I know that many people are interested in writing suspense, I'm deciding right now that my Maine cruise/Rent-a-Husband story will also contain an element of suspense.

And that brings us to another key element of plot --conflict. Yes, we've already started building conflict as we build our people, but no part of the plotting process works on its own. When we work on characterization, we also work on conflict. When we work on motivation, we work on characterization --that is, unless we're too busy with blue eyes that change color from slate to the blue of a summer sky at a blink, or arrogant eyebrows that narrow threateningly, or lush breasts, or six-pack abs, or whatever body parts we might choose to have the people in our story notice repeatedly while we let plot, conflict, motivation, and action pass us by.

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Let's not forget about cause and effect. A plot is made up of a series of events that are somehow linked, not a line-up of random or unrelated events. Stella Cameron compares plot to a pearl necklace where each pearl is a scene, linked to the next, which is linked to the next. Of course, you need a sturdy string to connect all the pearls --they aren't scattered about the house, under the sofa, tucked into a corner, hiding behind the bookcase. They're strung together because in fiction events cause complications, which cause more events.

One of the mistakes we sometimes make as authors is to innocently omit things that are necessary to the complete and convincing telling of the story. Remember, story isn't life. It's the author's vision. A fable, if you will. A fabrication of some selected sequence from life.

In the process of plot, during the long days of writing, the weeks of coming into and out of the story when we have time around the rest of our lives, inconsistencies can creep in. Don't worry. They happen to all of us. But those are the moments when, if we don't catch the problem, the reader will go back to re-read what didn't make sense.

She might go back a few paragraphs, a few pages, a few chapters, searching for what she's missed. She will probably, at first, blame herself. Reading too fast, perhaps. Or being distracted. But when she can't find the sequence that motivates a later action, she'll realize that the fault isn't hers, but yours, and then, as a writer, you're in trouble.

Maybe a writer can toss action into a plot, get it onto the page, and even past her editor without adequate motivation (though it's doubtful) --but you won't get it past the readers. Someone's going to find your mistakes, and in this day of instant communication, of readers' listserves and bulletin boards, mistakes spread fast and live long.

Maybe only one of every six readers will notice your mistake, but all it takes is one of them connected to the Internet and unafraid of voicing an opinion to draw the attention of other readers to that mistake. It's going to happen. It's a fact of life. But if it happens, at least let it happen over something we've honestly done our best to research, write, or think through and not over something we thought we could sneak past an unsuspecting public.

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Which brings us to motivation. If there's one place I think is naturally weakest for most of us when we begin our careers, it's the area of motivation...and yet I firmly believe that you can motivate anything if you just bother to look deep enough into the person's character to really understand what drives them, and if you take the time to share what you know with your readers.

The mistakes we make come from not spending enough time digging, enough time thinking through all the options a person might face, by not allowing for anyone to feel differently or choose differently than we would, ourselves.

Motivation is key to your plot. It's what drives your plot. It's what pushes your plot. Unless my heroine is strongly enough motivated to escape whatever pressure she's running from, my plot that moves her from place to place as she runs is going to feel contrived.

And, of course, story needs climax. The plot simmers, boils, and then finally explodes in the final scenes. I've seen lots of plots over the past decade, and I've come up with a few of my own. I've seen many (and concocted a few myself) where the story merely simmers for 200, 300, or 400 pages. We forget to raise the stakes, or maybe we don't fully understand how.

But you can't write a story where the plot travels a straight line from beginning to end and hope to compete in today's market. Tensions need to rise, pressures need to build, options need to disappear as the people in your story are thrust forward.

And lastly, we need payoff.

A successful plot satisfies. The final scenes, when tensions are red-hot and the people involved have reached a point of no return, we must deliver drama, emotion, and a logical and satisfying conclusion. I'm not suggesting that every plot has to end with a shoot-out or a physical confrontation, although it's more likely to seem necessary when you're writing mystery, adventure, or suspense.

Some stories are more thoughtful, but even if the final, climactic scene takes place in a Regency era library where two characters are sitting in

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chairs facing one another in the most civilized fashion, the stakes need to be as high, the emotions as intense as those you'd write if they were on their bellies in the dust facing each other with guns.

The ending delivers a payoff. The tension and the final conflict are resolved. The people involved in your story make decisions, achieve goals, draw plans for their new life. Something important has happened to the people in whom we've invested time, energy, and emotion, and the ending must be strong enough to reflect that.

Now we know what we're after. And of course, we knew it all along. Maybe I could have skipped this part and launched right into the act of plotting --but I wanted to make sure we were all on the same page before we started. I firmly believe that once we know what we want and why it's important, the how comes much, much easier.

Next time we'll begin to construct the plot for our Rent-A-Husband hero and Sailing Heroine. Meanwhile, please don't hesitate to ask questions!

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## Plotting with Sherry Lewis Lecture 2

I'm going to take a little detour today from the direction I thought I was going to take when we started earlier this last week. Don't worry...we're still going to end up at the same place, but now I think we'll actually get there faster. The direction I was going to take looked very boring when I opened up my initial outline this morning.

In my opinion, this is one of the beauties of plotting the way we're going to discuss this month. The outline is loose. It's flexible. And if at any point you decide that you don't want to wait to introduce something, you don't have to worry that you'll inadvertently leave out something essential.

Many years ago, before I sold my first book, before I even finished my first book, and long before I ever submitted anything, I hated the idea of plotting. I'd pick up a how-to book written by some successful author who stressed the need for an outline, and everything inside me would tighten with fear, loathing, and revulsion.

I was absolutely convinced that plotting would rob me of creative spark, would take away the joy of writing that I found in those sporadic and infrequent moments when I actually got myself into a chair in front of my typewriter. Nothing anyone said to me made any difference --not, I can admit now, because there was no value in plotting or creating a <gulp> outline, but because I tend to fly off into the mist when I'm creating.

Whether I'm writing a story, crocheting an afghan, or working on a counted cross-stitch picture. I don't like following patterns. While I have conceded the need to follow actual patterns with needlework, I still resist the idea of using the pre-defined colors because I want my efforts to be unique. Well, they are. Sometimes that's good, and sometimes it's not so good. But they are unique.

For some reason, though, I still wasn't sold on the idea of following a pattern when I wrote. And I resisted.

Boy, did I resist.

Some of you are probably familiar with Dr. Phil (Phillip C. McGraw, PhD)

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who rose to fame on Oprah's show and who now has a daily television show of his own. If you are, then you'll know that Dr. Phil frequently finds himself listening to people who've come to him for help. Some of these people take a long time laying out how unsatisfactory their lives are, but then they defend vigorously everything they're doing as being absolutely necessary.

At some point, Dr. Phil will look those people square in the eye and ask a very simple question: "How's that working for you?" Of course, the answer is that it's not working at all.

Well, long before Dr. Phil came around, that's the point I finally reached with my efforts at writing a novel. I resisted plotting until I was blue in the face, and I had a hundred justifications I could toss around at the drop of a hat to explain why I wasn't going to plot, but the sad truth was that it wasn't working for me. Not at all. Not even a little bit.

Not only had I never sold a book, I hadn't even finished one. And I finally had to acknowledge that I couldn't continue to do the same old thing in the same old way and expect different results. Life just doesn't work that way.

I'm sharing this with you because I want you to know that I didn't come to this plotting technique lightly. I may be able to tell you the journey I made in a couple of pages, but every realization represented a deep personal epiphany, and the journey to reach it was not easy.

I know that everyone in this class must be interested in learning to do something different when they plot or you wouldn't have paid good money to be here. But it may also require a big shift in the way you approach your stories. The plotting method I'm going to show you may not make sense to you immediately, and I'm very aware that you may have questions, so please don't hesitate to ask them.

I've tried many different ways over the years to plot differently, to skim, to cut corners, to make the process easier on my poor little self <g> but I always keep coming back to this method because this is what works for me.

So try it. Tailor it to suit yourself. Be as detailed or as vague as you need

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to be in order to be happy with the end result, and ask questions whenever they arise. I promise I'll be happy to answer them for you :)

So let's begin.

My plotting journey started when I was working on my first book that was eventually published. Before that, my stories tended to run along great guns for about 200 pages of rip-roaring action, dead ends, and wrong turns before they died a slow and agonizing death. Sometimes their demise wasn't so slow, but it was always, unfailingly agonizing.

There are writers who begin at the beginning of their books and end at the end, who never think too far ahead. Some people do it well, some people don't. I admire those who can write successfully that way. I envy them, too. But I am not one of them.

But there are also lots of people who insist they write that way, and resist the idea of doing anything else --but many of them are still waiting to sell their first book. If what you're doing isn't working for you, it may be time to try something else.

There are writers who plan every single scene in advance, right down to the smallest detail, who don't swerve from that plan as they write. Some people can write well that way and bring the people in their stories to life brilliantly. I am not one of them, either.

My plotting method falls somewhere in the middle. I see-saw --writing, plotting, writing, plotting --until I have everything mixed in just the way I need it. I like to have an idea where I'm going when I start, but as I said on Monday, it's not necessary. I've plotted some really great books out of thin air --and I'm going to share one of those with you during the course of this workshop. One I intend to actually submit to a publisher just as soon as I have a little time so I can finish up the synopsis and write the opening chapters.

I hope someone buys it. I'd love to be able to show you the process from thin air to published book.

To appeal to my creative self, the process has to remain fluid, to remain in motion so that I'm not locked into anything when I sit down to write

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every day. I also believe that every author has an obligation to the people in her story to remain open to their thoughts, their feelings, their wants, and their desires as they begin to trust you enough to share them with you. That's why my outlining --my pre-plotting --is purposely vague.

I believe in listening to the people I'm writing about when they start to speak --and they will start to speak if you remain open. Oh, you can shut them up if you want to. I've seen people do it. But ignoring the people you're writing about might not be the smartest thing you ever do.

When I started writing my first book ten years ago --a mystery --I planned to write about a female protagonist who was in her late 30s. Someone just like me. Someone I could identify with. Someone I could successfully portray on the page.

This woman was going to come to town to find out the truth about her sister's death, dig around a bit like the protagonists did in Phyllis A. Whitney's and Victoria Holt's books, and eventually solve the crime. Though I didn't know enough about the industry to identify the genre I was aiming for, I realize now that I planned to write a modern day version of the gothic.

For some reason I still can't explain, I started the book with an old man who was taking his morning constitutional around the lake where he lived. He was a walk-on character, and he was going to serve no purpose other than to find the body, notice a clue, and get shot later in the book so I could have a second murder.

Well, this old man didn't want to get shot. In fact, he was a great deal more interested in the goings-on than I expected him to be. And he was a great deal more sympathetic to the other students in the writing class I was taking than I expected him to be. *And* he was stubborn. He started popping up everywhere. He started asking questions. I tried to shove him into the background again and again, but he refused to go.

Before long he stole the book, and by that time I knew I had to let him have it. He became the protagonist in a series of mysteries, and he gave

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me grief through all six books in the series. It didn't matter what I plotted, he wouldn't solve the crime if he didn't want to. Period. End of story. He wouldn't question suspects. He wouldn't sniff around. He wouldn't do anything but sit in the Bluebird Café and drink coffee.

I'm sure many of you have found people like this in your work, and you may even resist them because you want to be in charge of what happens. Well, I don't believe the author is really ever in charge of the book she's writing, and I think that trying too hard to be in control is often the mistake we make.

Let the people in your story help you plot your book. They know what their story is, you don't. If you're really lucky, they'll let you come along for the ride.

When I began, I wanted desperately to avoid writing one of those books where a subplot appeared out of thin air in chapter 5 and was conveniently resolved by chapter 7, or even worse, where a subplot was introduced and then forgotten and never resolved. At the time, I'd just finished reading a romance by a well-known author that had left me feeling unsatisfied and, frankly, I was determined to write better than that.

I didn't care that she was World Famous and I was a nobody, I wasn't going to send something out into the world that left loose ends dangling. I'd read other romances in which authors introduced the characters, let them admire each other's body parts for a while, and then expected me to believe that they were in True Love even though they'd never even had a decent conversation.

I'd read a mystery by another high-profile author in which the murderer was introduced at the very beginning of the book but never referred to again. When the crime was solved and the murderer unveiled, I didn't even remember who the murderous character was. I had to skim back through the book and find the one spot where he'd been briefly introduced. That was cheating to me, and I've never read another of that author's books--even though she's wildly famous and consistently on the bestseller lists.

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I know it sounds more than a little presumptuous of me to think that I could do better than people who were raking in mega-bucks and selling so many copies of their books nobody can count them, but I just couldn't let myself send out something written so carelessly with my name on it, and I wanted desperately to find a way to make sure I never would.

To this day, I feel just as strongly about that today as I did then. Other people can do what they want, but nothing's leaving my desk until I'm satisfied that I've played through as honestly as possible with the reader.

Besides, I didn't have the luxury of being a big-name author, and I had a pretty good idea that editors would look a whole lot more closely at what I sent in than they were apparently looking at some of the books I'd just read. My biggest fear as an author has never been that I wouldn't be published. My biggest fear has always been that I would be published and then grow lazy and lose my readership. That, I've always felt, would be far worse than never being published at all.

It doesn't matter whether you're writing romance, mystery, suspense, fantasy, western, or mainstream, you will always need a plot. And you will always have subplots of varying importance and number. What always stopped me in my tracks when I tried to "outline" was the concept of weaving plot and subplots together. It was hard. It was confusing, and for a long time, it was beyond me.

But whether you have two subplots or ten, working them into your story doesn't have to be confusing. As I said before, I was working on my first mystery when I discovered a method I still use of weaving in subplots and story threads.



Being a lover of mysteries, I knew, of course, that I needed to sprinkle some Real Clues and Red Herrings throughout the book. I'd read books telling me I needed a specific number of real clues and a specific number of red herrings to write a good book, but figuring out what they were sent me into a panic.

I knew I'd need secondary characters. I knew I'd need suspects that would make everyone look confused while trying to figure out "who dun it" until the very end of the book.

Well, after much agonizing, I chose some really nifty clues and some dandy red herrings, and I had them in a list beside me as I wrote, and every so often I'd drop one onto the page. But instead of lying there looking unobtrusive, the Red Herrings popped up and waved, and announced to all and sundry that they were lies, specifically created to throw the unsuspecting reader off track.

The Real Clues were equally difficult. They seemed to glow with an electric sort of energy from the page, announcing to everyone that they were, indeed, Real Clues. And because they were so horribly obvious, a person with a brain the size of a Lego Block could figure out where I was going.

Subtle was not a word you could use on my early work. My Clues and Herrings were about as subtle as those scenes in the movies. You know the ones I'm talking about? The ones where the director wants you to notice that the telephone is off the hook, so the camera pans up slowly and lingers on the telephone (lit by a spotlight) for about half an hour so you won't miss it.

Needless to say, I experienced a "moment" of great despair that lasted several months. I was absolutely certain that no matter how much I loved to write, I just wasn't made out of whatever special stuff that real authors are made of.

I nearly quit. Almost hung it all up forever. I sat around, wallowing in my self-pity, until one day I had an idea, and I decided to give myself another chance.

It occurred to me one day that within every book there are several

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small stories that need to be told from beginning to end. It also occurred to me that my problem with Clues and Herrings arose because I was lying to the reader, and my lies were glaringly obvious. I realized that I had to find a way to tell the truth all the way through the book or I would never, ever, ever finish a book, much less sell one.

As I pondered, I realized that if I thought through each of those separate stories and figured out what I needed to tell the truth, I could convey that single story convincingly enough to convince the reader. After all, a murder mystery is only a mystery because each one of several suspects could have committed the crime.

So what did I need to show the reader to convince him that Suspect A could have committed the crime? Red Herrings are nothing more than a truth that looks as if it leads toward the conclusion --but doesn't. If only I could think through each story on its own, I could then weave all of my simple stories together to create one story with depth and texture.

I sat down that very day with a piece of paper and drew some lines and played around with them for a while. When I realized that I was on to something that would be visual enough to make me happy, I drew the lines on my word processor so I could appear Highly Professional. The result is a form I call "Story Threads" and I'm going to upload three versions of it into the file section of this listserve --one for Word, one for WordPerfect, and one in Rich Text Format.

Note: If you can't access the File section of the listserve, the list may not be associated with your Yahoo! ID. To solve the problem, log into Yahoo! using your ID and password. Go to your "My Groups" page. If this group isn't listed among your groups, use the membership wizard to find it and make sure it's associated with your ID. Once that's done, you should have no trouble accessing the file area.

Let me explain how this Highly Technical form works.

First, color is extremely important when you work this way -- especially if you're a visually oriented person.

I have a huge selection of colored Post-it notes and, if I'm working by

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hand, I assign one color to each story line or subplot in my book. I write each item on my list on the appropriate color of Post-it note and place it in the column.

If I'm working on the computer, which I do more and more these days, I choose a different color font for each story line or subplot in the book. You can work by hand with pen, paper, and Post-it notes (the small ones about 1" square fit nicely) or on the computer changing your font color for each thread, but don't underestimate the value of color!

In that first mystery, I listed in one column and using one color everything I needed to show to convince a reader that Suspect #1 was the murderer. In another, I listed what I needed to show about Suspect #2, and so on. It worked pretty well, so I decided to add a line for my protagonist's current ongoing personal problem, and one for his daughter's failing marriage (which was a recurring subplot in the series.)

I got so excited, and the story fell together for me so well, I decided to use my Highly Technical Form on a romance. To my delight, it worked equally well on the romance. I created a list of things I needed to show in order to convince the reader that the Hero learned to trust the Heroine, one for the Heroine's deception, one for her relationships with her niece and nephew, one for the Hero's strained relationship with his son, and so on.

That's a general and very vague description, and I'm sure you're probably confused, so let's do the real thing.

As we go through this week's lesson, I'll fill it in on a form and I'll upload it to the file section in the Week II folder so that you can download the partially completed form as well. Hopefully, seeing the form filled in with the examples we discuss this month will help when you use it on your own stories.

You'll remember that we're going to plot a romantic suspense story about a man who's a Rent-A-Husband and a woman who takes a sailboat cruise off the coast of Maine to escape the pressure. Of course, since it's a romance, my main plot will be the relationship between the man and the woman, so I know right away that I need to use a column

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for that relationship.

The top line on each column is for you to label what the story line or subplot is. In this case, we'll call it "The Romance." Beneath that is a shaded square that I sometimes use and sometimes don't, followed by an expandable square without color, and another shaded square at the bottom. The intent of these two shaded squares is to help you know where this particular story begins and where it ends.

Since we're working with the romance, we begin with the hero and heroine as strangers, and we end with the hero and heroine make a life commitment to each other. Between those two shaded squares we're going to list everything we need to show the reader to convince her that these two strangers are in love enough to make and keep that commitment to each other.

You can get as detailed or remain as vague as you need to make this work for you. I prefer to remain vague because I don't like locking myself into something that doesn't work once I get there. For instance, I must show the hero and heroine meeting for the first time, and that's what I'm going to put in my list, but I'm not going to decide where they meet at this point.

I don't have to decide that right now, and if I do I may find myself struggling to write a scene that's not working because I decided they should meet when the heroine hires the hero to fix something on her boat. Maybe that isn't the right place for them to meet, and if I lock myself into preconceived notions when I'm plotting, I might myself into a corner that will take a long time to get myself out of.

The other plus of remaining vague is that you make available to yourself the best of both worlds. You've plotted, but you still get the joy of discovering what happens when as you write. For both of those reasons, I try to stick to the basics. They meet. That's all I need to know.

My hero is Nick. My heroine is Belle. Arabella? Isabella? I'll figure that out later. Back to the plot.

Because this is a romance, I'll need to show the reader that Belle is attracted to Nick. I'll also need to show that Nick is attracted to Belle. I

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keep these separate when I list them because the chances are that they won't happen in the same scene. Belle is attracted to Nick. Nick is attracted to Belle.

To create a romance that I'll believe in, I need to see Nick and Belle becoming friends. I need them to talk. I need them to share their stories -not once, but probably twice and maybe even more than that. Of course, they won't have the same conversation over and over, but as their trust grows, they'll each reveal more about themselves and their pasts to the other (and to the readers.)

To make sure I include everything, and that I don't give the reader a huge dump of information in the wrong place, I usually use a column for each person's back story. That way I can break their past into bite-sized pieces and feed them into the story slowly, using them to build suspense when I want to or for humor if that's what I want. So I've created columns for Belle's Past and for Nick's Past. If the colors don't translate well, The Romance is red, Belle's Past is black, and Nick's Past is a medium blue that won't be confused with black when I'm searching later for continuity.

I need to show the attraction growing between Belle and Nick. They'll have a first kiss. I list each of those things in the Romance column because they're all necessary to make a reader believe that these two people are beginning a relationship.

Now a word about turning points. Most of you are probably very familiar with turning points, but let's talk about them anyway.

Each subplot, each story thread, will have turning points --places where that particular story thread takes a turn. It changes course and veers off in another direction. For a long time, I thought that the first kiss was a given -a turning point in every romance, as was the first time they made love. I've recently decided that's not true.

That first kiss is a turning point in some romances, but not in all. If Nick and Belle meet, are immediately attracted and begin a mild flirtation, that first kiss is a natural progression and not much of a turning point. It's an event that continues along on the straight line the story is already taking.

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To create a turning point we'd need something to drive Nick and Belle apart, something to come between them. A secret revealed, perhaps. Some kind of danger. A lie exposed.

If, however, they are being kept apart by some internal or external conflict from the beginning, or if they don't like each other, if they're openly antagonistic toward each other, then a first kiss would most definitely be turning point in their relationship.

Since I know absolutely nothing about Nick and Belle at this point, I'm going to run with my gut instinct and say that for this story the first is true. Nick and Belle are immediately attracted, they begin a flirtation, and their first kiss is not a turning point. I don't know what drives them apart, but something does and I'm going to include "something drives a wedge between them" on my list as a turning point.

How you choose to designate turning points is up to you, but I suggest that you mark them somehow --whether you use all caps or you bold the text or use italics, or if you're using Post-its and doing this by hand, use red ink to indicate the turning points --choose some consistent way to designate your turning points as you come across them.

How and when you use your turning points will determine the pacing of your story. If you want the story to be a page-turner that keeps the reader on the edge of her seat, you want frequent turning points that will take the reader through various twists and turns. Now they're together, now they're apart. It looks like Colin is the murderer. No! Wait! It's Edith!

By identifying your turning points in each separate story line, you can have a turning point in every chapter if you want a fast-paced book, or you can space them further apart to create a slower, more leisurely read. Rather than having a turning point for your romance plot in chapter 3, a major secret revealed from the heroine's past in chapter 4, and something else in chapter 5, you can lump several turning points together into one scene and turn the whole story together. The variations are endless, and they'll be different for each story.

How you put the elements together in the scenes will also allow for endless variety, and having all these plot points, all these turning points,

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means you really can avoid the saggy middle problem that haunts so many writers. But back to the plot...

If the first turning point in the romance story is that something drives a wedge between Nick and Belle, then the next turning point must turn the story in yet another direction. Maybe Nick and Belle are forced to work together for some reason.

If that's the direction I'm going to take the story, then how do I get from Turning Point A to Turning Point B? I probably have to show one or both of the characters trying to avoid the other. I probably have to show them being thrown together in spite of their best efforts to avoid each other. I'll want to show their attraction growing in spite of whatever the wedge is between them. And I may even show one character attempting to explain the wedge away to the other.

With just this little bit of work, I now have 17 different romantic elements to work into different scenes in the book as I write --and we're just getting started. I forgot to include their first touch and the first time their eyes meet. Now, it may be that the first touch will be one of the ways I choose to increase their attraction, but let's not leave either of those things out because they're very important to establishing the sexual tension between them.

At some point they're each going to realize that their feelings are much deeper than mere attraction. And they'll each have that moment when they realize that they're actually in love with the other. And a moment when each tells the other how they feel. So let's add another 6 romantic touches to our story thread.

These are all very vague and could apply to almost any romance that you ever write. As we go along, we'll get a little more specific about Nick and Belle's relationship, but for right now I'm going to leave that list and move on to another one.

Let's take Belle's past. We know that she's in Maine to escape the pressure, but that's all we know about her so let's find out a little. At some point, I'll have to ask her some deep and probing questions and I'll do some character work on her, but for now let's just get an idea

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about what makes her tick.

My favorite way to do that is to play a little game using the plot motivators and story spicers from STEAL THIS PLOT by June and William Noble. I highly recommend getting this book, even if all you do is familiarize yourself with the Plot Motivators and Story Spicers.

My favorite creative game is to print out the Motivators and Spicers on a piece of paper. (Actually several. The list is long and I like to use a really big font <g>). I cut the paper into strips so that one Motivator or Spicer appears on each strip. I put them all into a cup or a bag, and draw them out randomly to see what they do to my plot. This is especially helpful when I'm trying to turn air into a story :)

I keep my Spicers and Motivators in a cup on my desk so they're handy any time I want to draw one --so, of course, I'll draw one now.

We got Grief and Loss.

What happens if Belle is here after the death of someone close to her? I can take literary license and discard the "to escape the pressure" if I want to -and I think maybe I will. Grief and Loss would work well in a romantic suspense --especially if there's something she doesn't know about the death at the beginning of the story.

Maybe her father or mother died unexpectedly and left instructions for her to take this cruise in the will. Maybe her fiancé was killed in an accident six months ago and she just found a calendar in his things with a notation of the name of this tiny Maine village in his handwriting. The possibilities are endless, of course. Her best friend was killed. Her sister has disappeared and is presumed dead.

Maybe Grief and Loss isn't it at all. Maybe she's being motivated by the Chase instead. Someone has disappeared with the family jewels and she's hot on their trail. One of her parents has run off with a new lover, leaving the other heartbroken at home, and she's here to find them. She's an insurance investigator who's trailing a man who faked his own death.

Or maybe the suspense element doesn't come to Valentine Harbor with

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her. Maybe she's here to make amends. Many years ago when she was young and foolish, she ran off with her sister's fiancé. The marriage was a total disaster, but her sister (Lauren) has never forgiven her. Belle comes to town to make amends, meets a great new guy, has dinner with him, kisses him, and then learns that he recently ended a relationship with Lauren --and that Lauren is still in love with him.

I'm endlessly fascinated by the family dynamic, so that has some appeal to me --and I like the idea of making poor Belle face a really tough moral dilemma. But in that case, where does the suspense come from?

Could a simple Rent-A-Husband have something in his past that would put them both in danger? Well, why not? He's only been in town for a year, after all. Nobody really knows where he came from. Oh, sure, he has a story, but what if he's really an undercover DEA agent in town to monitor a suspected entry point for illegal drugs into the country? Or maybe he's been relocated to Valentine Harbor through the witness protection program. Or maybe he is just a simple former executive turned Rent-A-Husband who's looking for a quiet life...

Maybe he's getting the brush-off from Belle who's just learned that Lauren is in love with him when the two of them see something odd that turns out to be a crime in progress. I kind of like that idea. They see something that they don't even know is trouble --until things start happening.

So we now have columns for the romance, for Belle's past, for Nick's past, for Belle's relationship with Lauren, and for the crime.

If Lauren isn't speaking to Belle her when the story opens, a natural turning point would be for Lauren to agree to try mending the fences. Before that happens, Belle has to try to talk to her. If Lauren hasn't spoken to her in years, she's not likely to listen the first time Belle shows up on her doorstep, so Belle will have to try to talk with Lauren more than once and Lauren will have to be very determined not to listen to her. If Lauren caves too easily, we won't believe the rift existed in the first place.

So Lauren agrees to become friends again, and we need to see the sisters spending time together, becoming closer, sharing secrets. We

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need to see Lauren beginning to trust Belle again, so I'll include notations for each of those in Belle and Lauren's relationship column.

At some point Lauren will have to learn about Belle's relationship with Nick, but I'm not going to pre-judge where and when that happens. Maybe it will be a turning point that rips the sisters apart again, but maybe it won't. I only know that she has to find out or the story won't be satisfying to the reader.

We'll end here for now and take up again where we leave off next week. Just one last word in parting --you'll notice in Belle's backstory column that I've started breaking her backstory into very small pieces. As I mentioned earlier, I like to drip the back story in very slowly, keeping secrets from the reader just as long as I can get away with it. In this case, my instinct tells me that I don't want the reader to know that Belle ran off with Lauren's fiancé immediately, so I'm going to save that little tidbit for a turning point.

That means that the reader will know at first that Belle is in town to make amends and that her sister is angry with her. Before long, she'll find out that Belle betrayed Lauren somehow, but she won't get to know how and why until it feels just right --until that piece of information will have the biggest possible impact on the story.

If keeping secrets from the reader is a problem for you, if you just can't seem to avoid those huge dumps of backstory in chapter one, then you'll get a bonus when you plot this way because you'll learn how to break that backstory apart piece by piece, and you can practice picking and choosing where each piece of it should be revealed.

As always, I'm ready to answer questions. There are probably other people in the workshop wondering the very same thing. :)



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### **Plotting with Sherry Lewis Lecture 3**

We left off at the end of last week in the middle of plotting the story threads for our romantic suspense. I don't want to be redundant this week and drag the process out endlessly. It takes some give and take to get things where you want them. It takes moving things around, taking things out, adding new things in as you go.

Find a nice comfortable chair when you're ready to complete this step, and a good place to think. Maybe you'll be able to work with a lot of interruptions, and maybe you won't. I suggest settling in somewhere and having as much fun with this step as possible.

Let the creative side of your mind relax for now, because you're actually using the more logical side of your brain as you organize your thoughts. The question to ask yourself over and over again as you work through this step is, "what do I need to include to convince someone who reads this that this part is true?"

Plotting is only that. Deciding what you need to show readers to convince them that something is true, and then deciding when to show which parts of that truth to the best effect. If you can remember that, plotting (for me anyway) doesn't feel quite so difficult and overwhelming.

Never lie. Readers (and editors) become impatient and irritated with lies told to them by the author. You can misdirect and you can allow a character to misinterpret, but what you, the author, drop onto the page must always, always, always be the absolute truth; otherwise, you've broken trust with the reader and you can't recover from that. You may have the reader's money for this book, but she won't trust you with her money or her time when your next book comes out.

Readers will be willing, even eager, to suspend their natural state of disbelief as long as you take them on a ride they don't have to work hard to stay on. Too often, I see struggling writers working on stories that might actually work if they dig deeply enough and show enough to keep the reader on target, but they let the story lines trail off, fragment, and even fray and then wonder why editors pass on their proposals or readers wander away and don't come back.

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This may happen anyway for a number of reasons, some of which you can change and some of which you can't. At least you can keep it from happening because you made a mistake that would have been easy to avoid.

In the case of our romantic suspense, what do we need to include to convince a reader that Belle and Lauren are estranged? That Lauren is so angry with her sister, she's refused to speak to her for years? If we can convince the reader that's true, then what do we need to show to convince her that Lauren would be willing to try trusting her sister again?

If we can convince the reader *that's* true, what do we need to show to get them to the next turning point in their story?

What do we need to include to convince a reader that Belle and Nick become friends? Or that, even if they aren't friends, they are motivated by some outside force (like being chased by a murderer) to work together? And what do we need to show to convince a reader that Belle will open the door to him at all after she learns that he places her in danger of reliving a past she deeply regrets?

We want the people in our stories to be strongly motivated, but too often we concentrate so much on motivating their pasts, we forget to motivate them to change as the story progresses. We allow them to make huge life decisions, to act against character, and do things they've sworn they'll *never* do, for no good reason except that we need them to.

If you can shut down the creative side of your brain while you make your lists, if you can think logically through this step, you can make giant inroads into successfully removing you, the author, from the book when it's written. You don't have to creep onto the page to force your characters do something contrived to move them to point D because you already know that they have to do A, B, and C before they can believably make that decision.

Later, you can fire up the creative side of your brain again as you figure out *how* you're going to show all the things you've decided you need to share with the reader. You'll need to decide how you're going to combine

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all the points you must include for the best effect, and when and where the action is going to take place. For now, give that poor creative girl a rest.

It's enough at this stage to know that Belle is going to have to make at least one and probably several decisions in which she places Lauren's needs before her own. She is going to have to show a believable amount of remorse. Before Lauren will really trust Belle again, she may even test Belle in some way.

Is it believable to you that Lauren and Belle can have one or two conversations and patch up the misunderstanding between them forever? I'm afraid it isn't to me. I think that anyone who is passionate enough to run off with her sister's fiancé is probably not particularly calm and rational and logical. She's fueled by her emotions. And even if Lauren appears to be the exact opposite, anyone who can maintain a veil of silence for years at a time is probably a pretty emotional person.

Two such emotional people may try to discuss their differences rationally, but logic isn't going to last long and it's going to take far more than a promise of change to convince these two sisters that it might actually happen. Their underlying passion also tells me that something must happen to strain their relationship to the breaking point again. I just don't think I'll believe anything else.

It might work to have that moment serve two purposes because if Belle and Nick are hiding from or pursuing a suspected murderer, at some point they're going to be thrust into danger. We don't want to write about stupid characters who'll do something careless or foolish enough to put themselves in danger, but an angry Lauren, who has no idea what's going on, might show up somewhere to confront her sister and inadvertently blow their cover. I'll make a note of that, and then we'll see down the road whether it will work or not.

Sometimes it helps to think in sections as you work through your story threads to make sure that your characters are facing conflict throughout your story. I suppose you could even think of the sections of the book as "acts" if that makes sense to you.

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Take the romance thread, for example. When Belle and Nick meet, she wants to focus on making amends to her sister, so what will place Nick in conflict with her? It won't be that he's caught up with work and too busy for a relationship because if neither of them has any interest in a relationship, they won't be in conflict.

So let's say Nick is immediately attracted to Belle and wants to see where it will lead. He takes a few steps in pursuit and Belle takes a few steps away, but things are heading just where he wants them to when Belle learns about his prior relationship with Lauren. Don't let these things happen too fast.

Allow the characters to follow their growth pattern, their arc, in a natural progression.

So Belle now knows that Nick dated Lauren. Now Belle wants to avoid him, but he wants to explain. We have conflict, and we also have some ideas what we'll need to show to make the reader believe that this section, this part of the progression, this piece of the arc, is true.

We'll need to show Nick trying to see Belle and Belle refusing to talk to him -and we may even have to show it more than once. Even if we don't show everything (which would become boring and repetitive, we'll have to allude to a few unsuccessful attempts.)

We'll need to see him actively pursuing his goal and her actively pursuing hers. If we know that witnessing a murder (or some other crime) will be the inciting incident for the suspense plot, we'll want them to be together to see the murder, so again we want to make our scenes as strong as possible by letting them accomplish two or three things at the same time. We'll let Nick ambush Belle, determined to make her listen to him. While he's trying to talk to her and she's trying to leave, they see the crime being committed.

Now they're forced to work together --and let them reach that decision slowly enough to be believable, but not so long that either of them feels stupid.

Belle sets some firm ground rules. Nick sets about breaking them. Their attraction grows. Each realizes that their feelings are growing stronger,

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but are these real feelings, or just a reaction to the intensity of the suspense plot that's unfolding at the same time?

What do we need to show to get these two from this point to the one where they admit their feelings aloud? What will it take to allow Belle to admit what she feels, knowing that it will hurt her sister if she does? Always, always ask your most logical and critical self what you would need to see in another author's work to make you believe this --and then don't let yourself get away with less simply because it's easier :)

Keep in mind, too, when you're working with romance and planning the main thread that runs through their relationship, that your readers will connect (hopefully) with your main characters and care very much about them. You need to make sure you share things with the reader that will help her trust your characters together when they get to the end.

If you've written about a deeply wounded alpha hero who has withdrawn from the world to paint in his cabin after the death of his wife and infant son, you're going to have to show more than great sex with an attractive stranger to convince a reader that he's emotionally healed by the book's end.

If you're showing a young, naive heroine who's never known a man before, the hero needs a bit more than brawny shoulders and a great butt to leave us believing she'll be safe with him.

I try to cover my bases by asking myself what I'd need to see and hear to trust each character if the heroine were my sister and the hero were my brother.

Would I relax easily if my sister who'd been hurt terribly by her cheating ex-husband suddenly showed up with a new guy in tow and spent the entire afternoon discussing his great eyes and the way he kisses?

Or how about my wounded alpha brother? We know that he's been hurt, and hurt deeply. Maybe the accident that caused the deaths of his loved ones was caused by someone he once trusted. He has huge trust issues, and we care deeply about his healing.

So I sit down over lunch with my brother, and he tells me that he's

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met a new woman. Just showed up on his doorstep one day after her car broke down.

Hmmm. Really? What was she doing up there? I ask.

He tells me that she's there to sell the cabin that belonged to her grandparents before they died.

That doesn't sound too bad, so I ask him to tell me about her. Well, he's falling for her. Oh? Why? Well, she has this shapely butt and really great eyes.

Oh?

Yes!

Is that all? No. They like the same kind of music.

Oh. Wonderful. You can really count on a good Sting song to heal life's toughest wounds.

Well, of course that's not all.

Have they talked at all?

Only for a minute, but the way she licks her lips is really intense.

Wonderful. I feel so much better now.

Well, it gets better. After he saw her get out of the shower and caught a glimpse of her naked, he realized that he might be falling in love with her.

Now this might sound fine and even kind of funny in an abstract way when I'm talking about a stranger who just happens to be the hero in a romance novel --and knows that he's a romance hero thanks to a heavy dose of author intrusion. But what if this really was my brother? A real-life flesh-and-blood person who'd really been hurt? Would I just dab my napkin about my mouth and thank God that he was moving on with his life?

That's very doubtful. More likely, I'd be very protective and worried about

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him, and I'd have to know a lot more about this mystery woman to feel safe. I'd have to know that she can be trusted. I'd have to know that she's been through enough hurt of her own to make her truly compassionate. And I'd have to know that she isn't the love-em-and-leave-em kind.

These are things the writer must show me about the heroine, whether in scenes with the hero or in scenes by herself, to convince me to first invest my precious time in reading the book and taking the journey with them, and second to give me that "aaaah" moment I pay my money for when I plunk down my change at the book store.

I'm using romance as an example, but there are expectations in every genre, and you must understand what they are and deliver somehow if you don't want your book to disappoint those who read it. There is a clear beginning and a clear end to each subplot you'll write in your books. Take the time to figure out what you need to show the reader to convince her that the end isn't contrived.

The heroine who is trying to get a promotion will need to take certain steps before she either succeeds at her job or realizes she doesn't want it after all. The hero who is trying to mend a rift between himself and his teenage son will have to take certain steps before the reader believes that the two have a healthy relationship again. If you skip those steps, you lose the reader.



For plotting purposes, we need to think through the suspense story as logically as we would any other subplot.

Keep in mind that when you're working with suspense, the smaller the detail, the more chance you have of using smoke and mirrors to direct your readers away from it. You don't want to establish all at once that your murderer knew the victim, that she hated him, and that she hated him enough to kill him. Each piece of information can be dropped in to separate scenes and used in a way that will misdirect the reader's attention.

Let me show you what I mean. I'm including a scene from the fifth book in my first mystery series, NO PLACE FOR SIN. When I wrote out the story threads for this book, I had one line for each suspect. The murder victim was a woman named Lenore Irvine. David Newman was a suspect. Lenore's step-daughters, Paige and Hannah, were suspects. Webb Templeton (my protagonist's alcoholic son-in-law) was a suspect. Each of these people had reason to want the victim dead. Only one of them turns out to be the murderer. In this case, it was Hannah, the youngest daughter.

Very slowly as the book progressed, I laid the groundwork for each suspect, one small piece at a time. I showed Hannah's dislike of her stepmother all the way through the book, but I disguised it in every way I could for as long as I thought I could get away with it. I misdirected the reader by letting them first think that Webb might be guilty, by pointing the finger at David Newman, then Paige, and probably one or two other people along the way, and I did this by breaking down what I needed to show into bite-sized morsels which I then stirred together to feed the reader.

In my November 2003 Superromance, THE CHRISTMAS WIFE, I played out two mysteries as long as I could. We know from the beginning that Beau's wife walked out on him a year ago, but we don't learn until nearly three-quarters of the way through the book why she left. We know from the beginning that Molly has no memory of the night her mother died, but we don't know until almost the final scene what happened. But in both cases, we learn bits and pieces of each puzzle as the book progresses.

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When you read this scene from NO PLACE FOR SIN, you'll find that I've combined something from each suspect's story thread into the conversation, moving the investigation along, making each look guilty, establishing some useful red herrings, and, at the same time, establishing the fact the fact that Hannah had opportunity to murder her step-mother.

I didn't want to shine a bright light on that piece of news, though, so I combined it with other pieces of evidence from the other story threads that seemed, at this point in the book, more important than Hannah's opportunity to commit the murder. I also used Fred's tendency to be an unreliable narrator to my advantage, hoping that would help me to direct the reader's attention away from the substantial clue I'd just dropped.

Fred muttered to himself as he walked up Lake Front Drive in the cool morning air and tried to think of some way to bring up the subject of Lenore Irvine's murder with Enos again. He'd tossed and turned all night, remembering the look on Margaret's face when he refused to help Webb, and reliving the moment when Benjamin stormed out of the house.

By the time he'd finished his morning constitutional around the lake shore, he'd decided to go through the motions for Margaret's sake, and for Benjamin's. And that meant he had to look for evidence of Webb's innocence, whether he believed in his son-in-law or not. If in the process, he found proof that Webb was guilty, Margaret and Benjamin would have to accept that.

If Enos had any evidence of Webb's guilt, Fred needed to know. But he couldn't just ask. Enos had a tendency to jump to conclusions, and if Fred asked about the murder, Enos would conclude that he was trying to involve himself in the investigation.

No, Fred couldn't ask any direct questions. He'd have to use tact. Finesse. Subtlety.

Pausing on the corner of Main Street, he looked up and down the block, scouring parked vehicles for Enos's truck. The morning sun gilded the trees with the promise of spring, and a soft breeze carried the clean scent of life renewing itself. But to Fred, the beauty of his surroundings felt almost like a cruel joke.

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He couldn't see Enos's truck anywhere. Blast! Now what should he do?

He hesitated for a moment and watched the window of the Sheriff's office as he pondered his options. One of the deputies should be there, but that didn't mean they would be. Enos didn't like leaving the office unmanned during a workday, but Ivan liked to patrol in his new Bronco too much to stay indoors.

While Fred watched, a shadow crossed in front of the window. Good. Someone was there, and judging from the shadow's height, Fred figured it must be Grady.

Grady should know whether or not Enos had found Webb and how close they were to an arrest. The boy had a tendency to get a bit testy when he was in the middle of an investigation, but talking to him couldn't be any worse than talking to Enos. Six of one, half dozen of another, Fred supposed.

Besides, Grady *had* driven Webb home from the Copper Penny the night of the murder, and he just might know more about Webb's frame of mind that night than anyone else. It couldn't hurt to ask.

Tucking his hands in his pockets, Fred sauntered across the intersection and onto the boardwalk. He whistled softly, a tune his father had whistled when Fred was a boy, and did his best to look casual when he opened the door.

Grady stood with his back to Fred. He had both hands in the filing cabinet and his shoulders hunched in concentration. He looked up as Fred entered and marked his place in the drawer with one hand. "What are you doing here, Fred? No. Don't tell me. Let me guess. The Irvine murder, right?"

Very funny. Fred tried not to look annoyed. "As a matter of fact, I just stopped by to say hello."

Grady nodded slowly and frowned slightly. "Yeah. Right." He pulled his hand out of the filing cabinet and pushed the drawer closed. "Okay, what do you want to know? Or did you stop by to tell us you've solved the case already?"

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Impudent young whelp. Fred kept his face stoic. "Actually, I was hoping to find Enos here. Have you heard from him?"

"No, and I don't expect to any time soon. Henry Chambers and Ralph Mikesell are at each others' throats again over that property line again."

Fred rolled his eyes. He figured two grown men ought to be able to settle their differences without the Sheriff, but Henry and Ralph obviously didn't agree. Crossing the room, he dropped into one of the chairs in front of the battered wooden desk. "Another episode of Mutt vs. Jeff? That's all Enos needs. What set them off this time?"

Grady waved an impatient hand. "Henry's been talking about putting a casino on that north section of his and Ralph's decided he'd rather see Henry dead first."

"Well, that'll keep Enos busy a while." Fred let out a sympathetic sigh, shook his head, and looked around the room as if he didn't have anything specific to talk about. "Do you know if he's had a chance to talk with Webb yet?"

Grady's expression sobered. Positioning himself behind the desk, he squared his shoulders and tried to look authoritative. "I don't know, but even if I did, I wouldn't tell you. This is an official--"

"An official investigation," Fred said with him. "I know. And *you* know that the prime suspect happens to be my son-in-law. You can't blame me for being curious, can you?"

"He's *one* of the suspects," Grady snapped.

Interesting. Fred allowed himself a thin smile. "You're investigating other people, too?"

Grady nodded, but he didn't say anything. He looked suspicious, as if he thought Fred might be trying to put something over on him.

"Well, that's encouraging," Fred said. "Margaret will be glad to hear it. She's convinced Webb's innocent."

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"Yeah?" Grady smirked at him. "Well, everybody's innocent unless they're proven guilty, Fred. That's the way our system works."

Fred didn't need Grady to educate him about the legal system, and he almost said so. But he did need Grady to tell him what he wanted to know. so he bit back his frustration and tried to keep his smile in place. "Has Enos had a chance to talk to Lamar Templeton?"

Grady looked wary. Suspicious.

Fred broadened his smile.

"Yes," Grady said at last. "But he claims he hasn't seen Webb for over a week."

Fred didn't believe that, but he knew the lie had come from Lamar, not Grady, so he didn't say a word. "I understand you're the one who drove Webb home after that mess at the Copper Penny the other night."

The young man's expression stiffened. "Yeah, I was."

"I suppose I'd rest a bit easier if I knew what frame of mind he was in when you dropped him off."

Grady didn't rush to set his mind at ease. In fact, he didn't say a word.

Fred tried prodding him. "I've heard all sorts of rumors, of course."

Still nothing.

"Actually," Fred said, stretching in an attempt to look casual and unconcerned. "A number of people seem to think David Newman was more upset that night than Webb was."

Grady cocked an eyebrow at him. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." Fred stretched again and let a moment of silence hang between them. "Believe it or not," he said at last, "I don't have any desire to get involved in this investigation."

Grady let his irritating smirk grow a bit. "I *don't* believe it."

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"It's true," Fred assured him. "Every scrap of evidence so far points straight at my son-in-law as the murderer. Can you imagine what it would do to Margaret if I were responsible in any way for putting him behind bars?" He shook his head as if the idea didn't bear thinking about. "She's upset enough just knowing he's a suspect."

Grady considered that for a moment. "Well, cheer up. There were plenty of other people in town who didn't like Lenore. Webb's not the only one with a motive."

Fred looked supremely innocent. "Oh?"

Perching on the edge of the desk, Grady rested one elbow on his sidearm. "You're right about David Newman--he was one of the angriest, but Mrs. Irvine upset a lot of people. And if Hannah hadn't shown up when she did. . ." He shrugged and shook his head. "Who knows what would have happened."

Fred pretended surprise. "I thought Hannah Irvine was still too young to be in a bar. What was she doing there?"

"I don't know," Grady admitted. "Maybe she was worried about her stepmother. Or about her dad. She's like that, you know."

Fred nodded. After seeing her with her father the day before, he could easily believe that. His grandchildren were exactly the same way. "How old is she now?"

Grady gave his answer some thought. "She's about Benjamin's age, isn't she? Maybe a year older. I think she graduates this year." He laughed softly, but the sound held no humor. "You should have seen the way Mrs. Irvine reacted when she realized Hannah was inside the bar. She was on that committee, you know--PFAAD or whatever it is. And you know how worried she always was about appearances and setting a good example." He allowed himself another soft chuckle. "And there were her own step-daughters in that bar--" He sent Fred a meaningful look. "That's what got her and Kent arguing, you know."

Fred didn't know. He leaned forward and tried not to appear too eager. "Did you say, her own step-*daughters*? Plural?"

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Grady stiffened, as if he hadn't realized what he'd said. "Yeah," he said slowly. "Paige was there, too."

"Paige? Is she Kent's oldest?"

"Yeah." Grady stepped away from the desk, rubbed the back of his neck, and let out a burst of air. "I thought you knew."

"Knew what?"

"I thought you knew Paige was there."

"Why would I know that? I told you, Grady. I'm not getting involved this time."

"Yeah, yeah. I know that's what you said."

"So--Why would I know anything about Paige Irvine?" Fred mixed righteous indignation with a dash of honest curiosity.



"Because." Grady met his gaze, but he obviously had to force himself. "She was sitting at Webb's table. That's why Lenore got so upset with him. She started yelling at him and accusing him of. . .all sorts of crap."

Fred's heart settled like a stone in his chest. "What sorts of crap?"

"You know."

Fred suspected he knew very well, and he wasn't at all certain he wanted to hear it, but he pressed the issue anyway. "You mean she accused them of having an affair?"

"In so many words."

Fred had to force himself not to leave his chair. This must have been what Quinn had tried so hard not to say. And why Enos had let Quinn's elusive answers slide. Enos must have already heard the rumors before he and Fred paid their visit to Quinn, and he'd purposely avoided telling Fred. Albán must have known, and kept silent, as well.

"Are they having an affair?" Fred asked around the thickness in his throat.

Grady didn't want to discuss it, Fred could see that in his face.

Fred didn't care. "Are they?"

"Nobody knows," Grady said. He sounded miserable. "But Casey tells me they were looking pretty friendly."

Anger burned up Fred's neck and into his cheeks. "I didn't even know Paige Irvine was in town. When did she arrive?"

"I don't know. To tell you the truth, I was surprised when I found out who she was. I'd heard there was some sort of trouble between her and her parents. As far as *I* knew, she never even came to visit them."

"What kind of trouble?"

Grady shrugged. "I don't know, exactly. I don't even remember how I heard about it, unless Hannah said something about it when we were on

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the Fourth of July committee together last year." He looked down at his boots again. "Look, I shouldn't have told you about Paige and Webb, so just forget I said anything, okay? Enos will kill me if he finds out you know."

Fred wasn't likely to forget, and he didn't like being the victim of a conspiracy of silence. In that moment, he didn't care whether Enos liked him knowing or not. He pushed to his feet and started away, then turned back with one more question. "Is Paige still in town?"

Grady's expression grew almost frantic. "You *can't* talk to her, Fred."

"Did I say I was going to talk to her?"

"No," Grady said slowly. "But that doesn't mean you aren't thinking about it. If Enos finds out you've been to see her, he'll know you've found out somehow. And it will only be a matter of time before he figures out I told you."

"He won't hear about it," Fred assured him.

Grady didn't look at all reassured. He stood and tried to use his height to look intimidating. "I'm serious, Fred."

"So am I," Fred said. "Don't worry about it."

"If you talk to her, you'll be interfering with an official investigation," Grady warned, then added softly. "Not that that's ever stopped you before."

Fred didn't find the comment amusing. He crossed to the door and yanked it open. "All I want is for my daughter and grandchildren to be safe and happy. If Webb murdered Lenore Irvine, I want his butt in jail. And if he's cheating on Margaret, I intend to know about it."

Grady started toward the door. "You *can't* say anything to Maggie." He sounded nervous.

Fred glared at him. "Believe me, the last thing I'm going to do is run to Margaret with a rumor like this. She has enough to deal with already." He shut the door behind him and stormed away, but he

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stopped when he reached the end of the boardwalk to pull himself together.

His stomach rolled, his head throbbed, and his heart pounded a bit too fast for comfort. He gripped a four-by-four post near the steps of the boardwalk and tried to slow his breathing and cool his temper. But he was angrier than he'd been in a long time--with Webb, with Enos for keeping news like this from him, even with Albán.

He supposed he should be glad Enos hadn't found Webb yet. He didn't often feel the urge to hit another human being, but if he'd known where to find Webb that moment, he'd have kicked the son-of-a-bitch from one end of the county to the other.

Dragging in a steadying breath, he told himself he couldn't accomplish anything this way. This upset, he'd be no good to Margaret or the kids. But nothing cooled his anger.

Maybe, he thought illogically, he should have listened to Summer Dey. After all, she'd warned him to leave well enough alone.

I'm probably getting a little ahead of myself to include that scene in here, but I'm doing it because I hope it helps you understand the importance of breaking things down to their smallest component when you're working with your story threads.

The smaller the piece of information you need to work with, the more leeway you have when deciding how and when to use it. If you're dropping new pieces of information into your story all the time, you can successfully avoid the saggy middle problem that so many writers complain about. You can't have a saggy middle problem when you've identified and spaced the turning points in your various story lines throughout your book so that the story is always changing directions -- one way or another.

It would be impossible for Fred to ignore or misunderstand a larger clue about Hannah's presence at the bar that night --if, for instance, someone told him that she'd been there and that she'd been angry with her stepmother. Only a fool would ignore that piece of news if he's trying to get to the bottom of a murder, and we don't want to do

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anything to make our characters appear stupid.

So in the romantic suspense we're plotting in this class, let's make sure we break the story threads down into the smallest pieces we can to give us the largest number of options possible when we're deciding how and when to use them.

We want to put Belle and Nick in danger, so how are we going to do that? Shall we let them witness a crime? Something that leaves them outraged enough to try to solve it themselves? Something so dangerous it sends them running for safety?

Let's say that they witness a crime --a murder that's the result of a domestic dispute in Lauren's neighborhood. Let's also say that they find out at the subplot's first turning point that the murderer is a police officer. What do we accomplish?

Well, if we take away their safety net, we leave them with no immediate place to turn which will make it more believable that they would run to save themselves. It would also make it believable that couple of amateurs would become involved in trying to solve a crime in the first place rather than just telling the authorities and then going home. It also gives us a good reason to force them together even though Belle has vowed to stay away from him.

Those are some pretty compelling arguments to me, but what do we lose?

Well, it would play havoc with the idea of letting Lauren come looking for them and putting them in danger again at the end of the book. If they're running for their lives, they might not let Lauren know where they are. But that's only a problem if we need Lauren to give them away at the end and if we can't find another way to have her do that.

What other options do we have?

We could have them chasing the suspect for some reason --but what reasonable explanation could there be for Belle to team up with Nick to chase someone after she's vowed to have nothing to do with him? The only thing I can think of is that the person they're chasing has kidnaped Lauren for some reason, but that would make it very difficult for Belle and

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Lauren to work out their differences.

No, I think we need to have them running for their lives --and I think that Lauren has to be with them. Having Lauren with them will provide more conflict than we'd have without her. Belle and Nick won't be able to work through their differences easily because Lauren will be right there. We could also make good use of some nice tension between Nick and Lauren as Lauren adjusts to the fact that their relationship really is over.

So maybe we want to show that Belle overhears argument between two anonymous neighbors one day. That Nick and Belle see a car speeding away from a nearby house one evening. The next day Belle learns that a woman was murdered the night before. Naturally, she will be upset by that and she'll remember the car, so she'll tell Nick about the murder and they'll agree to tell the police about what they saw --even if they don't believe it's all that important.

We want to show them talking to an investigating officer who isn't terribly interested in their information. Then we need to show something dangerous happening to Belle and maybe Lauren if they're together. Something we can explain away as an accident. Nothing to really make us suspicious, but maybe enough to raise a tingle of apprehension in the reader.

But when Belle recognizes one of the officers they spoke to driving *the car* somewhere unexpected, she's going to start to get a bad feeling. She'll contact Nick again to tell him what she saw. They'll talk to the police again, this time making sure they have an officer they can trust.

At least that's what they think until Belle narrowly escapes death and they're no longer able to delude themselves.

Nick will convince Belle and Lauren to leave their apartment. Maybe they'll go to a cabin Nick knows about or a beach house, or maybe they'll just get a room in a nondescript motel away from town. Maybe Nick contacts someone he knows he can trust with their new location. But when they have an accident or they're shot at a few days later, they realize they can trust no one.

Nick, Belle, and Lauren change locations, but the stress is beginning to

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get to Lauren, and Belle insists they need to do something more productive than just running away. And maybe Lauren learns from a friend back home that something bad has happened and she's becoming hysterical.

Maybe Nick does some Internet research using a friend's log on and password, and he finds information about the dirty cop. And maybe Nick and Belle argue a little over what's the best thing to do with the information they have. And maybe Lauren wants to do something else entirely and maybe Belle urges Lauren to trust her --and maybe *that's* why Lauren blows up at Belle and wants to know what's happened to suddenly make her trustworthy. And maybe Lauren leaves in anger and inadvertently blows their cover.

And speaking of Nick...

He's not being very forthcoming about his past so far. In fact, he seems quite reluctant to talk about it. I know that he once had a successful career in the city, but I don't know what it was. I know that he gave up his career to leave the city, but I don't know why. And I know that he doesn't discuss his past with anybody --so when he shares a piece of his past with Belle, we're going to be standing firmly on a turning point. And when he opens up completely, I suspect we'll be standing squarely on another one.

Just from this little bit of information, I'm beginning to suspect that this story is about trust. Before Belle and Nick can trust each other enough to make a life commitment, they're going to have to learn to trust themselves.

While I'd dearly love to know what Nick's issues are and what's in his past, I'm not going to push him any further right now. Sooner or later, he's going to have to open up and share his secrets with me. If he doesn't, he can't be in the book. So I know he'll have to trust Belle, and I know that he'll eventually have to open up completely, and I have a suspicion that she's going to learn something about him before he's ready for her to. But that "disaster" may be what ultimately helps him to heal.

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I'm going to be content with that for now. It will be fun to learn about Nick along with Belle.

As you work on your own story threads (or puzzle pieces if that's a better image for you) you'll probably notice that you sometimes run into a piece of information that belongs in two or more story threads simultaneously--which is the case with the argument between Lauren and Belle. That's okay. Those cross-threads are what help to tie the story together so that you have one smooth story by the time you're finished rather than several concurrent and unrelated stories that run along for several hundred pages without intersecting.

How much or how little you explain to the reader about how and why they intersect is entirely up to you. If you want to write one of those books where it appears that you're telling unrelated stories until you're almost at the end, you can do it. If you want the connection to be obvious from the beginning, you can do that, too.

And this is why this method of plotting works so well for me. By completely understanding each story from beginning to end I open doors on possibilities I might not otherwise notice. Rather than closing the door on myself or tying myself into a small box that smothers my creativity, I realize that there are a number of different ways for me to share the information I have with my readers, and I get the luxury of choosing which both suits my mood and creates the effect the reader is looking for.

In the final discussion on Thursday, we'll talk about what to do with the threads now that we have them. We will probably discover a few things that we need to add, and we'll probably even decide to get rid of a few as we start piecing the plot together, but we have a nice start and enough ideas to carry us right into the next stage when we start up again.

You can download this week's example files by visiting the File Section of the group website, and please ask questions if any part of this doesn't make sense.

~Sherry

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## Plotting with Sherry Lewis Lecture 4

In this discussion, we're going to talk about what to do once you've finished laying out all of your story threads. There are two ways to work with your plot now that you've done this logical, editorial work. One is to sit down and start writing. The other is to do a little more preliminary work before you dive into the story.

If you're a "pantser" or an organic writer, the first option might appeal to you most. You know now what you need to include if you want to convince readers that you're telling them the truth, so start writing. Maybe you'll decide to keep one eye on your story threads as you go, checking off what you've included at the end of each day. Maybe you'll decide to spend a few minutes at the end of each day's work to look over what's left so your subconscious can work while you eat, play, and sleep.

Maybe that's even too much for you. Maybe you'll decide to tuck the story threads away in a drawer or a file and not look at them again until the manuscript is completed. You might print them out and have them by your side as you read your manuscript and check them off at that point to make sure you've included everything.

If you're a "plotter," or if you're submitting partials to publishers before you've written the entire manuscript, you'll probably want to take an extra day or two to pull your story threads together on a plotting board.

When I first began doing this, I created huge plotting boards on poster board using those large Post-it brand notes that are about 2 1/2" square. I'd stick them on the wall in front of my desk and look up at the plot often to see where I was "supposed" to be and what came next.

At some point, I lost the wall in front of my desk, so the giant-sized plot at a glance didn't work for me anymore. I created a smaller plotting board, affectionately known as the Port-A-Plotty, and I've uploaded WP and Word copies of it to the Week IV file section of the listserve so you can download it and use it on your own books if you'd like.

As you can see, it's another highly technical form--a series of squares

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designed to correspond to the number of chapters in your book. There are a few other blanks you can fill in if you'd like to. Feel free, in fact, to make this as simple or as complicated as you need it to be to pull the story together into a workable form.

The idea here is to weave your story threads in whatever combination works best to tell your story, grouping them in these squares by scene and by chapter. Remember, though, that this is an outline only --a rough map to follow to make sure you don't wander off somewhere or write yourself into a corner.

I have never seen the end product of a book turn out exactly like it appears at this stage of the plotting process, so don't ever think you're boxed in by what you decide now. As a matter of fact, I'm shooting off into the mist on this new mystery right now because things have taken a different turn than I expected them to. My character has a brother I didn't anticipate when I plotted the book, and he's turned into the main suspect in the murder. Naturally, that changes things a bit, but it doesn't change what I need to show to convince the reader about everything else.

In *THE CHRISTMAS WIFE*, I rewrote a number of scenes because I wasn't happy with the sense of community (or should I say the lack of community?) that existed in the book --and since it's about a woman who comes back to a small town for homecoming...well, it seemed to me there ought to be a sense of community.

Even though my deadline was just three weeks away when I began reordering the story, I was only moderately panicked by the sudden reordering of scenes because I had worked out my story threads, and I knew that everything I need to convince the readers I was telling the truth was still there.

I needed to make a few adjustments to the emotion along the way, and I left myself plenty of time to read the book two or three times to make sure the emotion and motivation flowed smoothly after the changes, but I never panicked because I knew the story structure was sound.

I just had to make sure that I'd included all the pieces of each thread to make sure that I'd end up with a book that satisfies me, the

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editors who count on me to tell a story that lives up to the promise of the partial I submitted, and the readers who like what I do.

Whether you've created your story threads on sticky notes or on your computer, this is where you'll discover why color coding each story line is important. The colors will allow you to step back from the plotting board and look at the colors to see where you've dropped a thread and failed to pick it up again.

One of my personal goals in plotting this way is to never have to write a sentence that is the much better equivalent of: "Meanwhile, back at the ranch, Mary was still trying to get water to the horses." I like to read books where all the stories are woven together so seamlessly that I never have to go back to refresh my memory about who a character is, or what was happening in a particular subplot.

Not every book is written that way, but as a reader I find those with huge gaps between visits to a particular subplot frustrating. When I looked at the stories I wanted to tell as a whole, huge, multi-chapter, multi-faceted entity, the concept of figuring out what to put where nearly kept me from writing at all because I didn't believe that I was capable of doing what other authors could not.

That's one reason why I steadfastly cling to this method of stringing out my story in threads before I start writing. Another is that it helps prevent that saggy middle problem so many authors complain about because with a little care, I can make sure the various stories are woven through every part of the book, that there are as many exciting and interesting things happening in the middle of the book as there are in the beginning and the end.

If you do decide to take the next step, there are a couple of different methods you can use to start filling in the blanks. One is to plot from turning point to turning point. Another is to place one thread through the book from beginning to end, then another, and then another.

Again, how you decide to get the story divided up into chapters, how you decide to combine the plot points, what combinations appeal to you, and how fast you want the story to progress are all up to you

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individually. There's no right way. There's no wrong way. Each author is different. Each book will be different. There is one frustrating part about this step, and that's the amount of moving, juggling, and shifting that usually goes on before I'm satisfied with the results. You may not experience the same thing, but if you do, don't start thinking you're doing something wrong.

It's sometimes a little easier to peel off sticky notes and juggle them around than it is to cut and paste increasingly large bunches of text when you decide to add a scene, but both methods work, so choose which one you're most comfortable with. The biggest drawbacks to using sticky notes are first that eventually they lose their "stick" and begin to drift off onto the floor; and second, that a big poster board covered with colorful Post-its is harder to store.

Of course, for our story we'll use the computer method :) Before you get started, it's helpful to know about your writing habits; for example, how long do your scenes usually run? How many scenes do you include in a chapter? How many pages are in your chapters? How many pages do you need this book to be? How many chapters does that equal?

In a romance, I think, most chapters run roughly 20 pages long. Not so in a traditional mystery, where chapters often consist of just one scene. If I were planning to submit this book to a category publisher, such as Harlequin/Silhouette, I'd plan on chapters roughly 20 pages long, and since my scenes generally run from 6 to 7 pages long, that usually means 3 scenes per chapter.

Since that's fairly traditional in the romance genre, that's what I'm going to use for the purposes of this workshop --but there is leeway, and it might be that having each chapter just two scenes long might make the pacing of the suspense part work better. That's something I'll have to watch closely as I begin to work on the book. Regardless of what tradition dictates, make choices based upon what's most beneficial for the story you're telling.

One of the things I realized as I sat down to start working on this plot was that I'd left out some essential story threads, one of which is Nick's current goal. I have a thread for his past, but he will be a very dull

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person to read about if he isn't working toward something when we meet him. I've added a thread for Nick's current on-going story, but I won't take the time to run through it here unless I discover that the rest of today's lesson won't work without it.

I've also added a thread for Nick's relationship with Lauren because while much of it will be covered in other story threads, there will be moments that only Nick and Lauren are privy to, so I'll need to work those in when I'm in Nick's point of view, or I'll need to slip into Lauren's for part of the story.

Depending on how long I want the book, I can branch out even further. I could add a story thread in which I let Lauren meet and begin to fall in love with a new guy. I could add a story thread for Nick's relationship with someone in his family, or with a close friend from childhood. I could add smaller threads to further enrich the lives of these people --a church bazaar, planting a garden, the neighborhood barbecue, a loved one's illness, a community event... The list is as endless and varied as it is in real life, and the longer the book you're planning, the more threads you're going to need to keep the story from getting bogged down in repetition.

But don't just choose threads randomly. Pick threads that will provide a contrast to your main story, or shore up the book where it's weak, or deepen the characterization, or enrich the setting so that it becomes almost another character in the book. Whatever threads you choose, think long and hard about the effect they'll have on your story. The wrong ones can weaken your story and the right ones can lend strength.

When I was writing my first romance many years ago, I had recently walked away from an abusive relationship. Leaving had nearly cost my life, and abuse was very much on my mind. I wanted my story to have depth and to mean something. After much trial and error, I came up with a plot that fit the bill and I set about writing the story of a woman who was on the run with her niece and nephew to protect them from their abusive father.

I thought it was vitally important to show abuse and help people who had no real experience with it to understand, so I came up with a subplot in

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which a secondary character was being abused by her husband and the hero was trying to help her get a divorce. I thought that subplot would strengthen the heroine's story by lending strength to her fears, and I wrote some great scenes that illustrated what I thought the reader needed to see.

The book sold to Harlequin Superromance, and I was ecstatic. Then came the revision letter. Among other things, my editor wanted me to cut that subplot and replace it with something else. Anything else. I was shocked. I was hurt. I was dismayed. I was confused.

I decided that I had to fight to keep that subplot in there, so after I finished pouting about it, I called my editor. I tried very hard to remain professional, but I did want to point out that there were some really great scenes in that story thread. (A writer's eternal torment: extreme doubt about their ability to do the thing right mingled with an explicable self-confidence about the end result when it's challenged. Figure that one out!)

When my editor admitted that the scenes really were strong, I felt a whole lot better. So much better that I was able to hear what she said about the effect of the subplot on the story as a whole. The subplot was actually too strong, she said, and it weakened the main story between the hero and heroine.

Even though I wasn't completely convinced, I decided that since she was a professional and I was still an amateur, and since she'd been doing this for years and I was still a newcomer, I would try to do what she suggested and see what I thought --with the silent vow that I would put that subplot right back into the story again (and I guess hold my breath until I turned blue) if I didn't like the result.

I rewrote that subplot and then I read the story again. Much to my surprise, my editor was absolutely right. When the subplot was changed, the story between the hero and heroine was able to take center stage and the result was a book that's still one of my personal favorites.

So take a good hard look at your subplots. Make sure they accentuate the main story without overshadowing it.

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So now we're ready to look at the Port-A-Plotty. The first row is where I put the book's title. The second is where you can make a note to yourself about the story's theme if you have one, or where you can try to pose what I call the Universal Question. This comes from my favorite book about writing that's ever been written.

It's called IF YOU WANT TO WRITE by Brenda Ueland. I found it years ago, long before I started writing seriously. I read it over and over and over again because she made me feel as if I really could write, and I desperately needed to feel that. In this book, she says:

I have so often been troubled by my own stories, especially those I wanted to be particularly pure Art, earnest and uncompromising. All the characters in [the stories] (except the villain) would seem to be ME and it might read like this:

"I love you," said Brenda Ueland to Brenda Ueland.

"I love you too," Brenda answered shyly, with a sincere look in her fine, strong face.

(fn: That is why you must not try too hard to be honest, sincere in your writing, for that, too, is a kind of falseness. When you are honest, there is no trying about it. You are just quietly honest, and that is all there is to it.)

I read many stories in magazines like that. The author need not be a hopelessly conceited ass either, but is often quite nice. I think it happens because such writers are not writing truthfully and objectively, but trying to put something over, to prove dishonestly and indirectly to the reader that their characters are so splendid. And that is propoganda, advertising writing, and not the truth.

No, the characters must come fully to life in your imagination. Then, objectively and accurately tell just how they looked and what they did. If they were fascinating and adorable, it will show. And it will be believed. But always try to write honestly.

If you want to say that Fascism is terrible, don't write a novel to prove it, for readers will feel: "These are not real people in this book, but a lot of

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conversing types, pushed about to prove that Fascism is terrible." No, it would be more effective, instead of the novel, to write straight, honest exposition, and tell just why Fascism is terrible. For in fiction, Chekhov said, you can pose a question (about poverty, morality, or whatever it is) but you must not answer it. As soon as you answer it, the readers know you are lying, i.e., forcing your characters to prove something.

That's a long quote to get to the heart of the idea, but I've never found a way to cut to it more quickly. Writing is always, and must always be, about honesty. Readers can sense dishonesty even if they can't put their finger on what bothers them about a book.

You may decide you want to ask your readers a moral question in your books. I'm sure everyone has read books that have made them come away a little shaken because they've had to take an honest look within themselves and decide how they felt about something. These kinds of books can be powerfully moving.

Recently, a book club I've belonged to for years read and discussed *A PATCHWORK PLANET* by Anne Tyler, which had that kind of effect on several members of the group and left them reassessing how they looked at people they pass on the street. *THE RED SCREAM* by Mary Willis Walker is another book that had a great impact on me by addressing the question of the death penalty. Ms. Walker never attempted to tell her readers what they should feel, but she discussed both sides of the question at length and then left us to figure out how we felt on our own.

These kinds of books aren't only written in the "literary" world. Many of the best romances do the same thing. We write books about redemption, about forgiveness, about love. Whether we identify them or not, moral questions are rife in our books. Can love really conquer all? Is there anything so horrible that it cannot be forgiven? What would it take to redeem a man who has lost hope?

If you want to write a book that contains a moral question, the most effective method is to allow the people in your story to fully explore both sides of the question. If you don't, the end result may be a lopsided book in which splendid characters exist only so you can tell the world something you've always wanted to say.

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I worked once with a writer who decided that her Moral Question would be whether abortion was right or wrong. The trouble was, she already had a very strong opinion on the subject. She tried writing a scene in which her heroine had lunch with her best friend and they discussed whether or not the heroine should have an abortion.

Many people in today's society would consider that this character had good reason to have an abortion, so her dilemma was well-motivated, but this author had trouble removing herself from the scene and the end result was less than satisfying from a fiction standpoint.

In this scene, the heroine told her friend that she wanted to have an abortion. The friend launched into a lengthy and compelling argument against abortion, which the heroine didn't interrupt or argue against. If this writer had been exploring both sides of the issue, she would have let the heroine respond with equally strong arguments for abortion--at least in her particular case. Instead, this heroine listened silently to her friend and then conceded. "You're right!" she gasped after a particularly well-placed moral blow. "I must keep this baby!" (Okay, maybe not those exact words, but close enough <g>)

The scene felt contrived and false, and was obviously a sounding-board for the author's views. She would have done better to write non-fiction so she could make all the points she felt the world needed to hear. So resist the urge to turn your story into a personal sounding board and remember always that you're telling the story of people for whom the choices aren't easy, for whom both sides of the argument have compelling arguments.

Also be aware that you may not know what the moral question of your story is until very late in the process. I write on faith most of the time, trusting that the truth of the story will reveal itself when the time is right. It's rare that I know what the story is really about until very late in the first draft. Sometimes I don't figure it out until I'm deep into the revision process. Sometimes I think I know what I'm writing about and then discover along the way that I'm actually writing about something else. So leave this field blank or fill it in --whichever works best for you.

There's a nebulous question floating out there somewhere for our story

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but I can't find it yet, so I'm going to fill in this blank with Making Amends and Forgiveness since I believe those are the central theme of this story.

The next blank is labeled Section Goals. Again, you can fill this in or leave it blank, depending on what works best for you. The purpose of the section goal is to keep the scenes contained in that section focused. For instance, in a traditional mystery, I might have the first section be where the protagonist is determined not to get involved in the murder investigation. The section would then end with a scene in which the protagonist is forced in some way to become involved.

Section Two might have the protagonist determined to prove that the Victim's wife murdered him, ending with a scene in which the protagonist learns that the victim's wife has an unshakable alibi and cannot possibly be the murderer.

Each section goes from one turning point to the next, and the people in the story will have goals for that section. I find this very helpful when I'm having trouble keeping my hero and heroine in conflict in a romance. It's just way too easy to lose that conflict and to allow them to start wanting the same thing, so when I make myself take a minute to think about the section and make sure I keep the conflict strong, I have a much easier time with the book.

As we discussed last week, the first section of this book will have Belle wanting to make amends with Lauren and determined not to let anything distract her, while Nick is attracted to Belle and interested in seeing where it will lead. The turning point is that Belle learns that Nick is Lauren's ex-boyfriend, so I'll place that piece of the story on the plotting board at the end of the first section.

Let me interrupt myself here to say that I have two plotting board forms on my computer. One has sections three chapters long, the other has sections four chapters long. I've also created a third with sections five chapters long, but I've never used it because the pace is too slow, so I won't bother uploading it unless you want it. I started out plotting this book using the form that's four chapters long and then realized that it would make the story drag too slowly, so I changed to the three-chapter form.

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The spacing of your turning points is what will decide the pacing of your story, and I want this story to move pretty quickly so I'm going to plan for major turning points roughly 60 pages apart. To keep the pace intense, I may place minor turning points in subplots in between the major ones so there's always something happening.

Deciding where your turning points need to appear and understanding why keeping them there is important to your pacing is probably the most effective tool I've ever found for keeping me from writing scenes that don't serve a purpose. If you look at the story threads form, you'll see that we have a lot of information to put in front of the reader before chapter three. I don't have time to lollygag or indulge myself writing scenes that move the story slowly along.

If you have trouble knowing what to include and what to leave out, and if your stories have a rambling, unfocused feel as a result, using this tool and disciplining yourself to follow the map you've drawn for yourself could help with that.

By the end of chapter three, Belle wants to avoid Nick and Nick wants to explain. At the end of the second section, Nick ambushes Belle to make her listen. They're together when they witness the murderer driving away. This still puts me at roughly page 120 before the suspense plot is fully launched, so I'll probably want to add a few things to be included in the early chapters that will help launch the suspense plot. I'll add things that will establish that something's wrong in the house down the street and hopefully begin to build an itchy sense of anticipation for the readers.

We'd already decided to show an argument between the victim and her husband, but maybe what we need to do is introduce the victim and not just the murderer. Maybe this woman could hire Nick to do something around the house, and maybe Nick notices a couple of ugly bruises she's tried to hide, and maybe she is very nervous because the job takes too long, and maybe she pays him cash and shoos him out the door.

And maybe Nick leaves a business card or something because it's something he always does so he doesn't even think about it, and maybe later, down the road, he becomes a suspect in this woman's murder because his business card is found at the scene of the murder....

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## Plotting

Sherry Lewis  
October 2004

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Once you begin this creative part of the plotting, you'll probably discover that adding of new pieces of the threads happens a lot. Now you're filling in details that you didn't let yourself think about before, but still try to resist becoming too detailed. Leave yourself plenty of leeway for when you begin writing.

This is how the plotting process seems to work best for me. I know where I am, I decide where I need to go, I figure out how to get myself there. I know where I am now, I decide where I need to go, I figure out how to get myself there. I usually work with one thread until I find myself lapsing into a stupor of thought and then switching to another, and I skip from thread to thread to thread, and back again until I have a rough roadmap for myself to follow.

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In this story, I'll focus on the romance and suspense threads, trying to work them into place first because they are the focus of the story. After they're in place, then I go back and fill in the holes with the other story threads. Sometimes I do this section by section, but other books work well when I work on the book as a whole.

The point is that there's no right way and no wrong way to work through this part of the plotting process. If you've thought through your story threads logically, you know that you need to show A, B, and C before you can show

D. If D needs to appear at the end of chapter three, then A, B, and C, need to come in chapters one, two, and the beginning of three.

Part of this process is logical. Part of it is creative. Group the threads together in ways that appeal to you, but try to keep each story, even the minor subplots, appearing regularly. The colors work to help me see at a glance that each thread is being pulled along regularly and that no part of the story disappears for any extended period of time.

I try to work at least two story threads into each scene --and more if I can work them in believably --because the more you accomplish in each scene, the more powerful it becomes. I also like the dramatic impact of having a person pursuing a goal from one story thread only to be tripped up by a disaster from another.

In this scene from one of my early mysteries, *NO PLACE LIKE HOME*, Fred Vickery's son, Douglas, is accused of murdering a man named Garrett Locke when Locke begins an affair with Douglas's ex-wife, Suzanne. Fred is determined to prove his son innocent, of course, and during the course of his unofficial investigation he discovers that Paula Franklin, the woman Garrett was seeing until he began his affair with Suzanne just happens to be married to a very unhappy man named Roger.

When Paula appears at Garrett's funeral, Fred decides it's time to pay her a visit. Though this scene appears to be about Paula's relationship with Garrett, I actually used it to plant some seeds for the real murderer's motive. Since I wanted to slip them in unnoticed, I tried to misdirect the reader's attention by having Fred misinterpret and misunderstand the

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clues-but that meant that I had to work very hard to get all the details in place without making it stand up and sing so loudly that Fred couldn't ignore it. Fred doesn't understand the importance of the information he gets here until later in the book.

The story threads I included here included things like establishing Roger's alibi, establishing that Garrett's ex-wife and daughter did not come to his funeral, reinforcing the fact that Garrett had a strong sexual appetite. I also took advantage of the scene to thwart Fred's plans yet again. He's hoping to find proof that Roger killed Garrett in a jealous rage, but that's not what he gets at the end of the scene.

Fred rang the Franklin's doorbell three times before the fragile-looking blonde woman from the funeral whipped open the door and stared up at him. "Oh! I thought you were my husband."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to disappoint you."

"I'm not disappointed." She flicked her eyes over him. "What can I do for you?" "I'd like to ask you some questions about Garrett Locke." Paula scowled. "Why?" "My son has been accused of murder and I'm trying to help clear him." "You're Douglas Vickery's father?" She looked him up and down, no doubt

making calculations about his age. "How do you expect to do that?" "By finding Garrett's real killer." She laughed shortly. "The sheriff seems to think he's found the killer

already." "He hasn't." She hesitated, but kept herself firmly planted in the doorway. "What do you

think I can tell you about Garrett?" "You knew him well." It wasn't a question. "Yes, I suppose." "You were seeing him romantically?"

She didn't answer, but her eyes narrowed. "Why do you think that?" "You looked pretty upset at the funeral." "Funerals make me cry."

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"You were the only one who did." Her shoulders sagged and she looked down at her feet. "Garrett and I were

friends." "You were more than friends." "Even if we were, it's none of your business." He ignored her. "You were seeing each other right up until the day he was

murdered, weren't you?" This time she shook her head. "No." "I understood you were." She seemed to take his measure and to find something she liked in him. "If I

tell you what I know, will you go away and leave me alone?" "If I can." "You have to promise." "If you didn't kill Garrett, you don't have anything to be afraid of. I'm won't

tell your husband about the affair--" She laughed bitterly. "Roger's already heard all the gossip. When he finds

out I went to the funeral today--" She broke off quickly when fresh tears misted her eyes. Fred didn't prod her, he just waited for her to regain control. "I didn't kill him," she said at last. "I hadn't even seen him in weeks." "Why did you stop seeing him?" "He changed. Overnight."

"Changed how?" Fred asked.

"Lack of interest."

"Oh."

"It was your daughter-in-law. She came back and Garrett forgot about me completely--acted like I didn't even exist. We'd been meeting a couple times a week before that. Then all of a sudden, nothing." She dashed tears away with the back of her hand. "He made excuses the first couple of times he stood me up, but after a while he stopped doing even that."

"And you believed they were having a . . . relationship?" He hesitated over the word and felt his face grow warm.

"Of course they were! Garrett was a very passionate man. If he

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was spending time with Suzanne, it was only for one reason."

Fred hated to admit it, but maybe Douglas was right. In his day, dinner between a man and a woman meant exactly that. But maybe now it symbolized something deeper. "Suzanne claims she wasn't in love with him."

"I never said she was in love with him. I know she wasn't, and that made it worse somehow, knowing she didn't even really want him." She twisted her wedding ring and looked away. "I was hurt. Of course I still had Roger, but there hasn't been anything between Roger and me for so long--We're more like an old habit than anything else."

"How long ago did your husband find out about your affair?" Fred asked.

Paula didn't respond.

He tried again. "How long did Roger know about you and Garrett?"

Paula blinked at him. "I don't know."

"You must have some idea."

"A while." She shook her head and looked vague. "A month before Suzanne came back, maybe less."

Well, that wasn't what he wanted to hear. The county attorney would argue there was too much water under the bridge for Roger to still be angry enough to commit murder. "And how long had you and Garrett been seeing each other?"



"Six months or so."

"How did Roger react when he found out?"

"He was furious. He told me flat out to stop seeing Garrett and, of course, I said I would."

"But you didn't."

"I intended to, I really did. But the night I decided to tell Garrett, he got some bad news. I just couldn't tell him then, so I decided to wait. And then it just got harder and harder. . ." Tears puddled in her eyes and she tried unsuccessfully to blink them away.

Sympathy tugged at Fred's heart. "Maybe we ought to step inside."

But she recoiled, horrified. "Roger would blow up if he found you in here."

Fred gave her a second to pull herself together before he asked, "What was Garrett upset about?"

"Yvonne--his ex-wife. He'd called her because he wanted to see Jenny, but Yvonne refused to let Jenny come. He even offered to drive down to see her--stay in a hotel and everything--but Yvonne wouldn't even discuss it. I just couldn't tell him what Roger said that night. He needed me. He told me I was the only one who made him feel better, and I believed him. But he didn't have any trouble dumping me the minute Suzanne came back." This time she made no effort to stop her tears.

Fred gave her a minute to compose herself before he asked, "Did he have much contact with Yvonne and Jenny?"

Paula shook her head. "Hardly any. Yvonne was so unreasonable about his visitation rights after the divorce that I think he gave up even trying for a while. But the last little while, I think he wanted to make things right with Jenny."

"Where are they living now?"

"Just down in Idaho Springs. Not far."



"Yvonne didn't bring Jenny back for the funeral. Any idea why?"

"She hated him. She'd do anything to spite him--even now." "Why?" Paula gave the question a little thought. "He never really talked about what happened between them. Funny, isn't it? Most people can't wait to tell their divorce stories, but Garrett never talked about his." Fred didn't hear the footsteps until they were too close to do anything about, and he knew Paula hadn't either. A second later, Roger Franklin came through the trees and stopped dead in his tracks when he saw them standing at the door.

"What the hell's going on here? I thought I told you we didn't know that son

of a bitch." Anxiety flickered across Paula's face, but she replaced it immediately with a stoic expression. "It's all right, Roger. Mr. Vickery just stopped by to ask me a couple of questions."

"I already answered every question either one of us is going to. Now get out of here." Fred thought that might be a good idea--just as soon as he asked one more thing. "Where you were the night Garrett was killed?"

Paula's eyes widened and her face seemed to pale a little. "Here." "All night?" "Yes." "Both of you?" Roger's face darkened like a thunder cloud. "That's none of your damn

business." Fred lifted his shoulders, hoping he looked casual, and started to turn away.

"It doesn't really matter, I guess. You can answer when you get the subpoena from our attorney." "You can't do that," Roger shouted.

"You go right on believing that, Mr. Franklin. I'll see you in the courtroom." He took several steps away.

"Hold on a second." Roger's voice dropped about an octave. "Look, I'm sorry. This whole thing has me really upset. The gossip and all." He draped an arm around Paula's shoulder and Fred saw the effort she used not to pull away. "I wasn't here that night--I'll admit it. I was at a meeting."

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"Where?"

"In Cutler. Look--" He held out his free hand in an almost pleading gesture. "I know what people were saying about Paula and that dirt bag. I figured if they knew I was anywhere nearby they'd start to wonder."

"What kind of meeting?"

"Rocky Mountain Fly Fishers. We meet once a month at the Copper Penny."

"What time did the meeting get over?"

"Ten-thirty or so. But I usually stay a while and have a couple of drinks with some of the guys."

"How long?"

Roger shrugged and looked down at Paula. "Till the bar closes. Look, you want to subpoena me? Go right ahead. That's exactly what I'll tell your lawyer and anybody else who asks. And Paula was here asleep when I got home." He gave her shoulders a squeeze. "Don't get me wrong, I hated that jerk, but I didn't kill him. And I think your son deserves a medal for what he did."

But going back to the story we're plotting here....

Of course I want Belle and Nick to meet in chapter one, so I'm going to drop their inciting moment in there. I want Belle to find out that Nick is Lauren's ex-boyfriend in chapter three. That means that I'm going to have to work fast to make it matter that Nick is Lauren's ex after only nine scenes, and I'm going to have to work hard to make sure I get all the other stories started at the same time.

I won't have time for a lot of extra stuff that doesn't matter. I won't have time to be self-indulgent. And that, for the sake of the story, is a good thing.

Figuring out what you need to show in each scene is still mostly a logic function. I may decide that my first scene needs to show these elements to the reader:

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Belle and Lauren are not speaking. Belle wants to heal the rift with her sister. Belle has not seen Lauren for five years. Belle is divorced.

But it still leaves me free to decide how and where I'm going to accomplish introducing all this to the reader.

I could set this first scene in Belle's car as she's driving into town, but I probably won't because I don't want to introduce Belle locked in lengthy introspection. It's hard to convince readers that a person is anything but self-centered when the first time they meet her she spends six or seven pages thinking about herself.

This isn't always the case, but it's true often enough to make me avoid it whenever I can. A person caught up in the middle of intense action isn't likely to stop long enough to discuss or think about what's going on, but a person who's spending seven pages driving toward her beloved grandma's house and rethinking her entire history on the way could probably benefit from a conversation with someone else.

My instinct will be to introduce Belle in conversation with another person. Now, obviously, this can't be Lauren unless I begin the book with an argument between the two sisters --and maybe I will. Maybe Belle will wait outside Lauren's apartment and try to talk to her, and I'll get this information into the scene as Lauren either refuses to speak to her, or tells her to go away.

Maybe Belle doesn't know where Lauren lives, so she'll try to talk to her after work. I could introduce all this information with Belle getting ready to leave home and explaining to a friend or co-worker why she has to do this. I could let her discuss it with a friendly looking waitress or a shoe salesman or the guy at the gas station (although those choices might feel a little unrealistic.)

I could have her discuss it with her mother, who's relieved to see this estrangement finally coming to an end, or with her father, or a third sister, or a grandmother. I know what I need to share with the reader, but I still have all the freedom in the world to decide how to go about it.

Maybe you'll decide to plot your story in detail. Maybe you'll decide just to place your turning points to make sure the basic story pacing feels

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right before you start writing. Maybe you'll plot one section of the story at a time and then write the chapters that go with it before you plot anymore.

Do whatever works best for you, and do it differently for your next story if you need to. I can't stress strongly enough that there's no right way and no wrong way. Taking the time to think through each story thread from beginning to end is the important thing. It's what will keep you from starting something you don't finish, from leaving readers feeling dissatisfied.

Remember when you sit down to write, that sometimes the story thread points will become big parts of the scene, but sometimes they'll be nothing more than an aside, a brief mention, something you gloss over because you need to establish it but you don't want it to be a focal point.

Take chapter two on the plotting board, for instance. The elements we're including are these:

Nick and Belle --second meeting. Nick asks Belle out. Belle doesn't trust her judgment with men #1. Nick is hired by Victim to fix something.

Even though establishing Nick's presence in the victim's house is important to the plot, I don't plan to make a big deal of it or call the reader's attention to it. It will probably work into the scene something like this:

Belle's hanging out in Lauren's neighborhood, hoping for another chance to talk to her. She notices Nick driving by. Nick sees her and stops. The focus is on their meeting. Yep, she's attracted to him all right, but she doesn't trust her judgment when it comes to men. They say hello. He asks what she's doing and she says she's waiting for her sister. He says he's on his way to Mrs. Bennett's house to fix a clogged drain. They move on to more important things, like would she like to have lunch with him? She hesitates, of course. She's here to make amends with Lauren --but Lauren won't speak to her, so what's the harm? It's only lunch, after all.... This is how the plotting process works for me. I hope some of you will find it helpful, as well.

I've uploaded the plotting board for this story to the group's files section

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## Plotting

Sherry Lewis  
October 2004

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so it might help you see how I might group these threads together when telling this story. Just remember that it's a very, very rough draft. I've spent only as much time working on it as I've spent putting together the discussions for this workshop. When I sit down to write this story, I may decide to reorder a few things, remove a few things, and add some others, but at least I have a pretty solid road map to follow, and that's all any of us needs. A solid roadmap and plenty of creative freedom!

I'll be happy to answer any questions you have so please don't hesitate to ask if you need clarification on anything we've discussed!

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Theme/Universal Question:

Section Goals

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Section Goals:

Theme/Universal Question:

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Section Goals:

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Theme/Universal Question:

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Theme/Universal Question:

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