

#10 PLOTTING PROBLEM: BACKSTORY BLUNDERS!- Alicia Rasley

<http://www.aliciarasley.com/probl.htm>

You can tell a new writer by how she handles backstory. (Backstory, by the way, is **everything of relevance that happened before the story opens.**) A new writer often thinks, "I better tell why this person is the way he is early, or I'll lose my readers' identification." Or "I have to explain everything about how we got to this point, or the readers won't be able to follow the events."

That's the understandable motive behind those long passages of "backstory dump" in so many Chapter Ones.

(I could illustrate this with a couple pages from Chapter One in one of my early books, where the heroine sits and thinks about the central trauma of her childhood, when her parents were taken away by the secret police, thereby making redundant her tearful revelation of same to the hero in Chapter Four... but in the interest of brevity and modesty, let's move on.)

But by laying out the backstory, those preceding events that motivate the characters, the writer might be wasting a powerful tool in creating plot suspense and character conflict.

Check out these examples of backstory blunders:

Emily Wilson opened the door of her childhood home and entered the large marble foyer. She gazed up at the lofty domed ceiling and was overcome with memories... especially the memory of her mother's body, hanging from a homemade noose tied to the chandelier. A note on the dining room table explained her reason-- the desertion of her husband Tom, Emily's ne'er-do-well father. In the fifteen years since, Emily had been fleeing from that memory, but now that she had come into her inheritance, she was coming home again. She would have to sell this house, because she could not bear to live with the memories.

John Merritt was born thirty years earlier in a small hollow in West Virginia, the son of a poor farmer and his deeply religious wife. In grade school he discovered an affinity for art, and a devoted teacher helped him hone his skill. He wasn't much of a student at Whiskey Hollow High School, but his art talent earned him a scholarship to the state university. There he met and married Joan Feinstein, a pretty blonde finance major from a middle-class Morgantown family. Their marriage was hobbled by class differences, and they divorced after five years and two children.....

Subconsciously, Teri worried that she might have inherited her sister's promiscuity, and so she avoided attractive men. She fooled herself into believing that her long-term relationship with a boring fellow programmer was all she wanted out of love.

So what's wrong with that, you might ask. Why not let the reader know all that's going on, all that's motivating the protagonist, all that's affecting the plot?

Why is it a blunder to begin with backstory?

Here's why:

For one thing, **the backstory dump kills the suspense by telling right away how we got here to this opening situation.** It answers the question, "What led to the character being in this situation?" almost before the reader has a chance to ask it. In the Emily example above, a major revelation-- that Emily had discovered her mother's suicide-- is just dropped into a description of the foyer. The reader will go "huh?" reading that, and wonder how important this detail is, because usually revelations of major formative traumas like that get a bit of foreshadowing or setting up (thus increasing the suspense). Here the suicide is just tossed away, and its effect on Emily spelled out in undramatic terms—we're told of, not shown, her flight from the past.

Consider how much more dramatic this opening scene might be if Emily unlocks the door of her elegant childhood home, steels herself, walks in, glances around the foyer, sees the chandelier, stops short, and then, resolutely, goes into the dining room, past the table, into the kitchen, and pulling a cell phone from her purse, calls a realtor and says, "I want to sell a house. Immediately. I don't care how much I get for it." The readers will be asking, "Wait a minute! It's a beautiful house! It's her childhood home! Why does she want to sell it? And if she sells it, why doesn't she try to get a good price?" On the heels of those questions will come the causal conclusion, "It must have something to do with that chandelier. I wonder what."

Once you have the readers speculating about the situation you've set up, you've hooked them. They have to keep reading to get more clues to see if their suppositions are correct.

But if you tell them everything upfront, you might lose the *narrative drive* that comes from posing the story question, in this case, "Why does Emily want to unload her beautiful childhood home?"

And it slows down the pacing by having paragraphs and pages right upfront which aren't taking place anywhere but (maybe) the protagonist's mind. The "capsule biography" (such as the John Merritt excerpt above) doesn't even take place in the character's mind-- it just sort of sums up his existence in the driest of omniscient voices.

Not to mention that the readers have no way of knowing how any item on that list related to the action of the opening scene. In some cases, that sort of retrospective actually *substitutes* for the scene's action. Since they know very little of who John Merritt is and what he's doing, they can't evaluate which in that list of life events matters—his religious mother? His art skill? This is where readers start to skim—and you don't want them skimming in Chapter One. If you let those details come out gradually, through the action, when they're needed, readers can begin putting together the puzzle of who this man is, and what matters to him, and how he will live in this plot.

So consider each of those biographical items, and which matter *to the story*, and when you can sneak that in. For example, if the religious mother is important, maybe John can think, at some crucial moment, that his mother would be praying hard at this point, but that when he left West Virginia, he left the praying to her. What this does is make for a more character-driven read: Readers learn what's important from the characters' thoughts and actions, not from author summation. They learn much more about who this character is from what he remembers of his past (his mother's prayers) and how he currently interprets it (he has abandoned prayer himself) than from a long list of biographical details.

And most important, **the backstory dump doesn't leave enough for the characters-- and the readers-- to do.** The story is a journey for the protagonist, from an embarkation to a destination. The protagonist doesn't necessarily choose that destination, especially if it is a point of psychological growth (which can be painful!). But part of the journey is coming to recognize limitations and finally, because of the events of the plot, decide finally to overcome them.

Readers participate in this journey by identifying with the protagonist. That identification will be sharpened if you don't tell readers ahead of time what the protagonist needs to learn or overcome, but rather show it through

the events of the plot. That way readers can discover, along with the protagonist, the destination from the journey itself.

For example, if Teri's response to her sister's promiscuity is still subconscious, part of her journey will be towards bringing it to the surface and dealing with it consciously, rather than just reacting irrationally. You don't have to tell the reader what Teri doesn't understand herself, but you can show her reacting to the sister's past. Say she meets an attractive man, and is thinking about deepening the acquaintance when he says casually, "You know, I went out a few times with your sister." Teri might freeze up and immediately, without further consideration, decide to have nothing more to do with the man. Maybe he will have to pursue her, even charm her against her will, force her to confront her fear that if she gives into attraction, she will be like her sister-- out of control.

In the end, it comes back to **Show, don't tell**. If backstory is important to the story, that importance should be demonstrated within the story, not merely by some authorial comment on top of the opening scene. This will have the effect of creating a little bit of reader suspense, as they put together the puzzle of the story. This increases reader involvement even in books without external mysteries.

So how do you know when to show backstory? Here's the rule of thumb: **Wait until the readers need to know it**. And then give them only as much as they need to know at that point, and as "transparently" as possible-- if you can, through the thoughts, actions, memories, or dialogue of the characters. Let the readers be part of the "making of meaning" by providing them the context to ask questions ("What's up with that chandelier?") and puzzle out the answers.