

# The Origin Scene: Where Your Story REALLY Starts

By Guest Blogger

writersinthestormblog.com

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I had a lot of great questions this month, but Laura Drake's question goes directly to the very heart – the foundation — of your novel. She asks:

“I'm stuck on The Origin Scene. Partially, I think, because it feels like if I get it wrong, the rest of my book is screwed. Any wisdom there?”

Here's the easy (and scary) and admittedly way too glib answer: **Yep, get it wrong and you're screwed.** Let's dig deeper into what that really means, and how to make sure you avoid it.

To do that, here are the things we'll discuss:

- What the hell *is* an Origin Scene, anyway?
- Why is it so crucially important?
- How can you “get it wrong”?
- How can you get it right?



## What the hell *is* an Origin Scene, anyway?

An Origin Scene captures the moment, which occurs *long* before page one of your novel, when your protagonist's defining misbelief takes root. It is almost always occurs during childhood.

## This might have you asking, “Um, what's a misbelief, exactly?”

As you no doubt know, every protagonist enters a story *already*

wanting something. This is what sets her story long agenda – the agenda she steps into the novel with already fully formed. To be super clear: this is something she's wanted for a long time, since *way* before page one.

The key thing is: in all that time your protagonist *hasn't* gotten what she wants. Hey, if she could easily get it, sure, you'd have a happy protagonist, but then you'd have no story. In other words, something has *long* stood in the way of your protagonist achieving her goal. And *that* is her misbelief.

We're not talking about a logistic misbelief – like, “Hey, I thought the world was flat, and you won't believe this, but turns out it's round!” Rather, it's a misbelief about human nature; a misbelief about what makes us tick, about what people are *really* like, inside. And your protagonist — just like us here in real life — is not after this info on human nature as an

academic quest or as “knowledge for knowledge sake,” but to help her achieve her primary goal: continued physical and emotional survival.

Misbeliefs tend to spring up during a traumatic situation in which your protagonist has skin in the game – meaning, something that matters to her is at stake. And by traumatic, I don’t mean a great big “dramatically” traumatic moment, like getting sucked up into a space ship or snatched and tossed into the trunk of a car. I’m talking about the more mundane, insidious variety of everyday inter-personal trauma. The kind that cause you to suddenly realize things like: “The nicer a person is to you, the more they’re trying to manipulate you,” or “The only way people like you is if you never rock the boat,” or “Only weak people need help.”

And here’s the kicker: in this traumatic situation, your protagonist’s misbelief isn’t a misbelief at all, but something she believes to be wholly true and that rescues her from something that otherwise might have caused her emotional harm. Thus her realization doesn’t make her dumb, stupid or flawed, it actually makes her smart. The problem is that while said misbelief might have been true in *that specific situation*, out in the real world, it’s *not* true. I mean, every time someone is nice to you it doesn’t *really* mean they’re trying to use you. I don’t think.

The trouble is, what was adaptive in that one specific situation, is maladaptive everywhere else. But your protagonist doesn’t know that. To her, her misbelief is a very savvy piece of inside intel that she’s insanely lucky to have learned early in life. As far as she’s concerned, it’s not what’s hurting her, it’s what’s saving her. Thus it’s no surprise that she then uses her misbelief to help her achieve her agenda, trusting it to guide her through the rocky parts of life.

And so by the time she’s an adult, her defining misbelief will have snaked into just about every crevice of her life, picking up supporting misbeliefs along the way, securely rooting it in place. That’s one of the main reasons that misbeliefs are so hard to recognize, let alone overturn.

### **Why is it so crucially important in the beginning?**

Because – make no mistake — overturning your protagonist’s misbelief *is what your plot will be constructed to accomplish*. Which, of course, means you must know, in detail, what her misbelief is, where it came from, and how it’s shaped her worldview since its inception.

That’s why your protagonist’s defining misbelief cannot remain general or conceptual. It must be traced back to the single, concrete event (again, almost always in childhood) during which her worldview shifted.

And capturing that moment – in scene form — is your novel’s Origin Scene, and it takes place long before the novel opens, often by decades. It is always written in the first person, regardless of the novel’s POV. The goal is to transform this life-altering turning point moment into a full-fledged scene, so you know not only what happened, but exactly how your protagonist made sense of it *internally* as it unfolds.

### **How can you “get it wrong”?**

What defines your story’s arc – in fact, this is your novel’s genuine throughline — is the inside intel on why your character does what she does as her worldview evolves thanks to the events of the plot. A novel is about an internal struggle, not the external struggle that triggers it. On one end of this arc is the Origin Scene, when your protagonist’s misbelief takes hold. The novel itself begins much later, when the plot forces her to go after what she wants, but in order

to have a shot at it she must recognize, question, and ultimately see through her misbelief. Your story makes its point near the end, with your protagonist's "aha" moment – that is, when her misbelief finally bites the dust. Or as T.S. Eliot so aptly said: "The end of our exploring will be to arrive at where we started, and to know the place for the first time."

So "getting it wrong" means that the Origin Scene does not set the novel's whole arc of internal and external change in motion. When that happens said novels tend to begin with some surface level, or randomly "dramatic" moment that's geared to "objective" generic drama, rather than something with unique, *subjective* meaning for the protagonist.

You get it wrong by not digging deep enough, by staying surface, general. That is, by writing the scene from the outside in, so we're not inside your protagonist's head as she struggles to make sense of what the hell is happening. The whole point of the Origin Scene is that one of your protagonist's seminal beliefs is going to get blown out of the water, and replaced with a powerful misbelief, and we want a front row seat *inside her head as she draws this conclusion*.

### How can you get it right?

I think this is the real question you're asking — how do you know what the right moment is? Since this is what kicks everything off, what if it kicks it in the wrong direction? That *is* a scary thought.

The good news is that by the time you're writing your Origin Scene, you've already created a lot of potent story-specific info: you know the point your novel will make, you know who your protagonist is *before* the novel starts, you know what she enters wanting, and you know what her misbelief is. So while yes, you're now creating something out of nothing, you're doing it purposefully, rather than by "pantsing" blindly forward into the abyss, fueled by nothing more than desire and a whole lot of caffeine.

And that can feel clunky. Which is totally fine. Don't fight it. Lean into the clunk. And know that there is no "right" answer here. No "one" moment that will work, making every other moment "wrong."

The reason this can feel so intimidating is because you are consciously creating the seed from which will grow the web of internal logic your protagonist will use to make sense of everything. In the beginning it can feel almost arbitrary. It is not.

Rather, it will be — by design — one end of a very clear, escalating trajectory that culminates when your protagonist finally realizes that what she thought had been keeping her safe is really what's kept her from getting what she wants.

There are many possibilities for an effective Origin Scene— if you're struggling with it, **my advice is to use an exercise that the brilliant book coach Jennie Nash came up with:**

- Put on comfy clothes, and get a timer. Set it for 45 minutes.
- Sit down at your computer, or pick up your pen and write out a possible Origin Scene. Remember that there is no "one" right answer. Start writing and don't stop. Don't censor yourself, don't try to "nail" it, let yourself go. If this sounds like pantsing, it kind of is – but with parameters, with context, and, most important, with internality. Meaning: make sure you're letting us know what your protagonist is *thinking* as she struggles with what to make of what's happening. Also don't worry about "writing well," don't edit, don't waste

time with lengthy description or lovely luscious metaphors. That would defeat the whole purpose of the exercise.

- When the timer goes off, stop, stretch, get a snack, then set the timer again for 45 minutes. Write a different Origin Scene – one that happens in a different place or time. Jennie is strict about this: You can't just write a different version of the same scene or the same scene from a different perspective. She means a *whole new scene*.
- When the timer goes off, rinse, repeat. The third time is often the charm. Let yourself be absurd, even. Ridiculous. Don't hold back!
- Evaluate which scene resonates the most. Jennie says that it's often the one that surprises you the most, or calls up a strong emotion in you. You can, in other words, feel it in your bones.

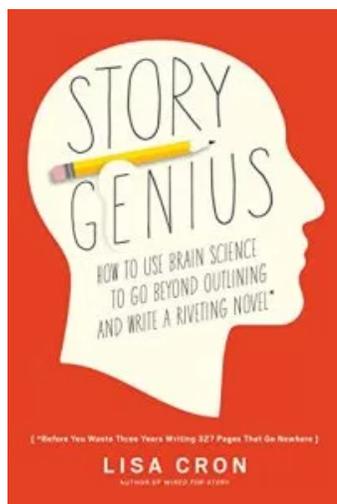
Pair this scene with the aha moment scene when your protagonist's misbelief will be resolved near the end of your novel, and you've got an Origin Scene caffeinated enough to effectively drive your whole novel from start to finish. (Yes, as in just about everything, coffee is key.)

Otherwise, you risk falling into the most common rabbit hole novelists inadvertently tumble into: writing 327 pages that turn out to be nothing more than a bunch of things that happen.

And that, too, calls up a strong emotion. One that even coffee can't help.

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## About Lisa



**Lisa Cron** is the author of *Wired for Story* and *Story Genius*. Her video tutorial *Writing Fundamentals: The Craft of Story* can be found at Lynda.com, and her TEDx talk, *Wired for Story*, opened Furman University's 2014 TEDx conference, *Stories: The Common Thread of Our Humanity*.

Lisa has worked in publishing at W.W. Norton, as an agent at the Angela Rinaldi Literary Agency, as a producer on shows for Showtime and Court TV, and as a story consultant for Warner Brothers and the William Morris Agency. Since 2006, she's been an instructor in the UCLA Extension Writers' Program, and she is on the faculty of the School of Visual Arts MFA program in Visual Narrative in New York City. In her work as a story coach, Lisa helps writers, nonprofits, educators, and journalists wrangle the story they're telling onto the page. She can be reached at [wiredforstory.com](http://wiredforstory.com)