

Tuesday: 7/23: Session 6 - Surprising your reader

Readers love to be surprised. Just like us (because we're all avid readers, too, right?), they love plot twists, characters who make shocking decisions, or events that turn out the way no one expected. While readers love to feel "in the know," the minute they feel as if they're sure how everything goes from here, a book becomes boring. So as writers who want fans—and that's all of us—it's in our best interest to use every opportunity to surprise our readers.

Dialogue is a great place to do just that. As a matter of fact, I think it's one of the easiest tactics to use to surprise readers because all it usually requires is a good set up and then one great unexpected line. Character and plot surprises can often be complex, but a dialogue surprise can often be achieved with one or two small but imaginative revisions. Even if it's as simple as a character saying the opposite of what's expected, it packs a load of punch and delights readers.

Let's look at a great example from J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*:

She saw Ron, who stood there holding the sword and dripping onto the threadbare carpet. Harry backed into a shadowy corner, slipped off Ron's rucksack, and attempted to blend in with the canvas.

Hermione slid out of her bunk and moved like a sleepwalker toward Ron, her eyes upon his pale face. She stopped right in front of him, her lips slightly parted, her eyes wide. Ron gave a weak, hopeful smile and half raised his arms.

Hermione launched herself toward him and started punching every inch of him that she could reach.

"Ouch—ow—geroof! What the--? Hermione—OW!"

"You—complete—arse—Ronald—Weasley!"

Now, on one hand, Rowling has been setting up the relationship between Ron and Hermione for most of the series. But that backstory aside, even in this scene the second paragraph does a great job of setting us up to expect a kiss. Ron has just done something heroic, and the detail of Harry wanting to fade into the woodwork furthers our expectation of a tender and intimate moment. Rowling's description of Hermione as she moved toward Ron, and Ron's reaction, get us ready to sigh with relationship-fulfilment happiness. As readers, we've been "shipping" them for multiple books and associated blockbuster movies. (If you don't know what I mean by "shipping," go ask the nearest person under 20.)

Instead of kissing him, she launches into verbal and physical attack. We laugh and accept it, because this is also a completely believable response from headstrong Hermione. And that raises an important point: your surprise can't be so far out of character that we won't accept it as plausible. Push your surprise as far as you can, but know your characters well enough not to go too far—or your reader is bound to feel manipulated rather than delighted.

Our movie example is perhaps the best use of dialogue surprise in cinema history. I'm talking, of course, about Han Solo's classic come-back to Princess Leia's declaration of love from *The Empire Strikes Back*.

Princess Leia: I love you.

Han Solo: I know.

Video clip (if you want to watch it): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qND0aIXOLbw&t=52s>

Again, the dialogue and action—as well as cultural norms—set up the expected response that Han Solo fails to give. There’s a kiss, Solo tells Chewbacca to take care of Leia, as well as the element of danger that tells the audience this may be the last words we ever hear from Han. It’s a pivotal plot point in the story. We think we know what’s coming when Leia declares her love. We know he loves her, so the entire audience expects his response to be “I love you, too.” We’re shocked, but in the best possible way. Why? Because the response of “I know” is also completely in keeping with Han Solo’s character.

An interesting side note is that this now-iconic response was never in George Lucas’ script. According to actor Harrison Ford, they shot multiple takes of the scene with an “I love you, too” response, none of which felt right. Director Irvin Kirshner finally told Ford to just say whatever felt right, and Ford came up with “I know.” He knew his character well enough to take a leap of just the right size, and ended up with one of the greatest comebacks ever. Isn’t that exactly what you want your reader to experience?

Homework: Take a look at a pivotal plot point in your current work. Where can you inject a surprise declaration or response? Take a look where a character has a clearly expected response and brainstorm 10 unexpected ones. Then evaluate each of those to find the one that packs the most surprise punch without stepping out of bounds for that character. Then rewrite the action or dialogue leading up to it to strengthen the surprise. Share the scene (in before and after form if you like) with the class.