



Those Who Forget History
Using Backstory to Enhance Your Novel
Cynthia Owens
Lesson Six – A Tangled Web
How to Weave Backstory into Your Novel

The most important thing to remember about backstory is that your readers don't need to know everything about your fictionals, but *you do*.

Let's repeat that.

Your readers don't need to know everything about your fictionals, but you do.

In order to create believable fictionals, you need to know everything from where they lived as a child to what happened to them last week—and everything else in between! But if you tell it all to your readers, they'll be bored within a few paragraphs and put the book down. Instead of telling them what happened in your fictional's past, let them find out for themselves as they turn the pages of your novel.

That's where weaving the tangled web of backstory comes in.

Think of your fictional's backstory as a series of clues that you drop into a scene to pique your reader's interest. In order to be effective, those hints must be relevant, either to fictional development or to the plotline. Show why the backstory is important. We are all products of our past, and what happened to us before shapes who we are, what we believe, our values and fears. Most importantly, backstory shapes how they will react in the present.

Triggers

Triggers—sight, sound, tastes, smell, even touch—can trigger memories that can be used to reveal your fictional's backstory. Perhaps Mary is hurrying back to the office for an important meeting and walks past a bakery where the aroma of freshly-made bread is wafting into the air. She's immediately transported to summers she spent with her grandmother, learning to bake bread.

Or what about Esther? She hears the sound of breaking glass and it immediately transports her to the time when her home was bombed and her parents killed, leaving her an orphan.

You can use these triggers to reveal your fictional's backstory without an information dump. Take Mary. You don't need to reveal Mary's entire relationship with her grandmother, but you can insert a short sentence about Grandma's toil-worn hands kneading the bread. In Esther's case, you might insert a line about where the bombing happened, or a flash of light exploding in her head.

Action

Action—and reaction—is another tool you can use to weave in your backstory and hook your readers at the same time. Show an inciting incident, then show why it happened.

Example: Sylvia and Dan are standing in a park filled with mothers and children and strolling couples. Sylvia suddenly lashes out and smacks Dan across the face, hard. Tears pouring down her cheeks, she screams at him, “You’ve done it again, and for the last time!”

See? We’ve already revealed some of the couple’s backstory, without slowing down the pacing or info dumping. We’ve also hooked our reader because we’ve raised questions about the scene: what happened, what has Dan done, and so on.

Stay in the Present

Whenever possible, keep your story in the present plot. Delving into the past, while important, can slow the story down and take the reader out of the plot. But weaving in a quick flashback—even if it's only one line—will keep your fictionals in the present while revealing a bit of backstory.

You can also weave backstory into your plot with dialogue. Your hero may open up to his lover about some aspect of his past that still haunts him. Your heroine might sit down over coffee with her best friend and discuss her fears about her husband, mentioning how her past and how it affects their relationship.

Slow Down the Pace

Strange as it may sound, you can also use backstory to slow the pace of your story. Yes, that's right. There are certain times when you need to slow your pacing. After a hugely dramatic scene—perhaps your heroine has revealed to her lover the secret that's affected her life since she was a child, or your hero has just learned the true identity of his father—it might be a good time for them to reflect on their past.

Assignment: Write a few paragraphs of a scene, weaving in your fictional's backstory.