

CONFLICT

what your readers want

This essential ingredient is the first thing to check for if you feel your material falling flat

RECENTLY, I ATTENDED a reading given by several unpublished novelists. I was in the company of a woman who happens to be the editor of a well-known literary magazine. Afterward, I asked what she thought of a chapter one of the writers had read. She shook her head in disapproval, then expressed the reason for her dissatisfaction in three simple words: “Not enough conflict.”

Conflict, to put it simply, is struggle, and struggle is interesting. Sometimes—not always—it means violence. When two kids fight in the high school cafeteria, a circle of spectators soon surround them. Television viewers are riveted by the sight of cops tackling a bad guy. Even a couple of dogs snarling at each other in the street have the potential to make us stop to see what happens.

But violence is only one kind of conflict. A cop nailing a speeder, a couple arguing in a restaurant, a man balancing high on a tightrope—these scenes all depict people amid struggle. By our very nature, we can’t look away. We are conditioned to ask: *What happens next? Is he going to make it? Who is going to win?* Our fight-or-flight response is engaged.

The job of the writer is to harness this natural, human urge, and make it work in his favor. Conflict, in fact, is not just one way to make a story gripping and engaging. It’s the only way. If you’re writing something that you feel isn’t working, but don’t know why, ask yourself: *Is there enough conflict in this story?*

The history of our relationship to conflict is also the history of our culture. In prehistoric times, as we all know,

accounts of heroism in battles or hunts were relived through stories told for years, or even generations, afterward. (This is true even today. Ever heard of Alvin York or Audie Murphy?)

Eventually, probably beginning in Greece, combat was ritualized, losing its bloodier side and taking on the form of athletic contests. The Olympic Games came into being as a way to showcase warrior-like strength and agility, but without the terrible waste of life. The first games were held in 776 B.C.

Interestingly, the first Greek tragedies appeared some 200 years later. Theater began as a refined, artistic expression of the same conflict people thirsted to see between athletes. Now, with the development of the tragedy, there was yet another, deeper way of exploring the emotion that conflict arouses in us, without physical prowess as a limiting factor.

From battlefield to arena to stage, then, is a clear progression. And from ancient Greek theater to modern fiction is but a simple step. As I showed in an earlier article (March 2008), Aristotle explored the elements of great writing in *The Poetics*, and his advice is still cogent today. Even postmodernist authors Don DeLillo and Thomas Pynchon, were you to ask them, would describe their fictional characters using Greek words—the *protagonist*, or hero, is the “first actor,” while the *antagonist* is “one who struggles against” him. Characters are defined not by height, weight, gender or race, but according to their role in the story’s conflict! The roots of postmodern literature are firmly planted in

the not-so-distant past.

Yet this is not to say that a story must be bloody, or even violent, to be interesting. Conflict, like all strong action, often works best when presented subtly. Consider the classic work *The Great Gatsby*. Published in 1925, just seven years after the end of what was then the most horrific war in history, the story features two characters, Jay Gatsby and Nick Carraway, who are both combat veterans, and who had actually encountered each other while serving in France. Yet they discuss the war only once, in the most veiled terms, and without reference to the horror they must have witnessed together. Gatsby’s guests often whisper that he had “killed a man” to get to where he was in life. Nick, as a soldier in a machine-gun battalion, must have killed men, too. If he did not pull the trigger himself, he surely saw the carnage that resulted.

For all the violence implied in the story, though, it contains just two violent moments: Gatsby’s car striking Myrtle Wilson, and Myrtle’s husband shooting Gatsby and then killing himself. But both of these moments are described obliquely. We see the effects, but not the incidents themselves. Here, where a lesser writer would have

splashed blood all over the page, the masterful Fitzgerald uses the war as subtext. Its specter hangs in the background, informing the mood of the story, but never dominating it. The true struggle has to do with the tension caused by various romantic intrigues between the characters. We as writers would do well to absorb this

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and your fiction needs

By William Kowalski

lesson: Violence, like sex, is strongest when it's implied, not shown.

For generations now, we've been exposed to violence in popular entertainment: car chases, fights and murders ad nauseam. At this point, many of us may feel an aversion to even a mere discussion of conflict. But we are not all ignorant plebes in the coliseum, screaming for the blood of gladiators. Conflict can—and should—take plenty of other forms in your fiction. How much struggle is involved in a young man trying to tell his parents he's gay? How hard does a woman have to fight to rise to the top position in her firm? What kind of battle took place in Rosa Parks' mind as she decided to sit in the front of the bus? All these forms of conflict, and nearly every other kind you can think of, have the proven potential to rivet an audience.

Gone With the Wind is another example of a story that has little actual violence, but is rife with struggle on every page. In this case, the Civil War is what looms in the background, again mostly as subtext. Meanwhile, from the first page, Scarlett O'Hara is engaged in her own battle: to win the heart of Ashley Wilkes. But we also see Scarlett struggle against her own ignoble instincts. We are rooting for a resolution to the conflict—not for the North to defeat the South, but for Scarlett to overcome her challenges and get what she wants. Seeing her struggle played out to a satisfactory—though not necessarily happy—conclusion is the chief pleasure for readers of this treasured tale.

When explaining the importance of conflict to writing students, I always suggest they approach it by thinking first about what their protagonist wants, and then thinking about what gets in

Conflict need not take the form of violence. There is little actual violence in these two American classics, but there is plenty of struggle.

her way as she goes after it. Kurt Vonnegut famously said that a hero (or heroine) “should always want something, even if it's just a glass of water.” Conflict is the term applied to her struggle against all those factors—be they human or otherwise—that conspire to prevent her from getting that glass of water. And if readers can identify emotionally with your protagonist, they will feel a vested interest in the outcome of her struggle. We want her to win because we recognize that she is a part of us.

SO, A STORY'S overall success will depend on these questions: Why should I, the reader, care if she gets that glass of water or not? How easy was it for her to get it, and how was she transformed by her struggle? Was she sympathetic—that is, did reading about her thirst make me feel thirsty, too? Did I cry tears of joy as she finally hoisted the glass to her lips? Or was I bored by a story about someone who got thirsty and drank a glass of water? After all, nobody wants to read about people who are happy because they got what they wanted. We want to see characters engaged in conflict at every moment, or our attention will be turned elsewhere.



There are many ways to create conflict on the page, but the best way is to make sure it forms the backbone of your outline, before you begin writing. So, how should you

start? Once again, think in terms of your protagonist's motivation. In my first novel, *Eddie's Bastard*, the narrator wondered throughout his childhood who his mother was. This was his glass of water. It took him 18 years to find out, and along the way he encountered significant obstacles. In *The Road*, Cormac McCarthy's brilliant novel, a father and son face horrendous odds surviving in post-apocalypse America. And in *Ragged Islands*, Don Hannah gives us the final thoughts of an old woman as she lies dying, fighting for her last breaths in a struggle that we know is ultimately doomed to failure, yet which we cannot tear ourselves away from.

What is it about conflict that draws our attention? Is it because, just under the surface of our postmodern veneer, we are still animals, drawn to the smell of blood? Or is it that we find strength in knowing we are not alone in our daily fight to keep going, and that the urge to survive is the one thing all people can be assured they have in common? Regardless of your answer, if you hope to write appealing fiction, mastering the use of conflict is an absolute must.

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