



Fiction's Cornerstones

Copyright Brenda Wilbee 2014 • Brenda@BrendaWilbee.com • BrendaWilbee.com

Four cornerstones create a foundation upon which to build any structure, including story. Conflict, Crisis, Climax, and Resolution. Without these four elements there is no story. Why? Because fiction reflects real life. We live in Kansas and tornados sweep through.

Let's go through these one at a time. CONFLICT , CRISIS, CLIMAX, and RESOLUTION

1) CONFLICT : “People come to see the fight, not the arena.”

So says Lee Roddy, author of *Grizzly Adams* and many other stories and TV scripts. Our first page must offer a front row seat to conflict.

Most beginning writers spend page after page of describing the arena. Sometimes they never get to the fight. They build *fictional* walls, but forget *foundation*. When all is said, it's only a pile of paper and primary reason why so many books never make it.

Dave Lambert, editorial director for Somersault, says when we write fiction we must “step into lives already full.” For example, “If a couple is arguing, we dare not describe the room, the clothing, the facial expressions. We begin our story when the neighbor bangs on the door—in the middle of the fight.”

I fault myself. After writing most of my first novel, I took a workshop from Lee Roddy. He had us read the first 100 words of our book out loud in class. When I finished *my* golden prose, Lee said, “Pretty words, Brenda. But they don't say anything. Cut ‘em.”

I cut not just the first 100 words, but *seven* chapters! I had scene after scene after scene describing the preparations for heading out on the Oregon Trail. Chapter Eight was the first time the reader got any whiff of conflict.

Why is conflict so crucial to fiction? Because fiction is a mirror that reflects universal truth and our reality. Scott Peck in *The Road Less Traveled* opens with “Life is difficult.” So must our fiction be difficult. We have to make it hard on our characters if readers are to identify and learn something of their own lives.

For example, in *Sweetbriar*, I began with

Louisa Boren tried hard to pray, but the words came hard. She was unaccustomed to kneeling at her bed fully clothed, and thoughts of her plans crowded in. It felt even stranger to be lying in bed with her shoes on, the blankets piled high. But she couldn't run the risk of Ma coming in and finding her still dressed. The blankets would have to stay.

My opening line in *Thetis Island* is

A seagull's shriek woke Theresa Parker, but the picture on the west wall really brought her awake. “I can't get away from you,” she whispered in the quiet dawn of her first morning back at Thetis Island.

In *Shipwreck*, I write:

Emily Wooldridge stood beside her husband on the deck of their brigantine, the *Maid of Athens*, shivering in the evening dampness of a London fog. She watched in disbelief as their crew was hauled aboard, slung like cargo over the shoulders of a brawny rigger and dumped down into the forecabin at the bow of the ship. They were drunk, every last one of them..

To summarize the start of three of my books, Louisa is sneaking a mirror aboard her family's Conestoga; Theresa is trying to escape a relationship; and Emily's husband's new crew is drunk out of their gourds. Note: Conflict doesn't have to be catastrophic as Sandra Bullock stuck up in space in the film *Gravity*. Conflict can be simple, ordinary, everyday stuff. But we do need it.

2) CRISIS: "Let the black hat win the battles."

Murphy's Law: Things get worse before they get better. We all know that life kicks the stuffing out of us, and we all know it can escalate. One thing leads to another, as it did for Sandra Bullock in *Gravity*. First the Russian debris is about to arrive, then she and her coworkers can't get into shelter fast enough, then a man dies in the hurling clutter, then Sandra begins to lose oxygen. Then, then, then... The point is, every story sits square on a foundation that includes not just Conflict, but Crisis.

The second cornerstone to fiction is Crisis, Conflict out of control. It's Lee Roddy's "Let the black hat win the battles." It's why the isolation and physical conditions of space defeat Sandra Bullock time after time.

In *Shipwreck!* the initial conflict is the drunken crew. But that's not the worst.

1. The hung-over crew wake up at sea surprised. While they'd been drinking in some London pub, a rigger had tricked them into signing on as deck hands. Blimey...
2. *Then* they discover a woman is aboard. Better to sail on a Friday than sail with a woman!
3. *Then* the ship catches fire; the men blame the woman.
4. *Then*, while Captain Wooldridge lands them all safely on a remote island in the Antarctica, they are without survival basics and their ship tantalizingly burns off shore.
5. *Then* they find a battered, leaky longboat to make their escape to the Falkland Islands 500 miles away, but winter is closing in quickly.
6. *Then* the men prefer getting drunk on the *eau de cologne* instead of working on the longboat.
7. *Then* the captain becomes deathly ill, and Emily must commandeer these fools and force them to work on the longboat, their only salvation.
8. *Then* the captain recovers enough to launch the repaired longboat with six of their nine on a buffet ing sea—but without chronometer or quadrant.
9. *Then* it's midnight when they miraculously come around a rocky bluff of the Falkland Islands, but then the small boat hits a rock and Steward—the only trustworthy crewman—is thrown overboard.

Every step forward triggers two steps back. Same scenario in literature and film: *Pride and Prejudice*, *The Odyssey*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Shakespeare In Love*, *The Waking of Ned Divine*, *Ground Hog Day*, *Twelve Years A Slave*... Do these stories get worse before they get better?

Initial Conflict gets worse, spiraling from Crisis after Crisis, until finally it reaches a Climax—our third cornerstone of fiction. In *Gravity*, Bullock reaches a point where she gives, the Climax of her continued failure to rescue herself. The black hat is winning all the battles, no hope of resolution. She gives up, shuts down all systems, and resigns herself to death. Conflict, Crisis, now Climax, our third cornerstone in fiction.

3) CLIMAX: “Time to let the white hat win the war.”

Climax is night’s darkest hour before the dawn. In the “sweet romance,” Climax is chapter 12 of a prescribed 13-chapter book. In *Shipwreck!*, it’s when the ragged crew finally *know* they’re within reach of the Falkland Islands but can’t find their way to safety in the dark. So close, so far away. Trouble piles on trouble. The wind is too weak to fluff the sails, the men are too weak to row, the tide is turns, taking them out with it. “Stand by to come about!” the captain cries. Again and again they try; to port, to starboard, tacking in search of wind, oars splashing clumsily. Now seaweed tangles in their rudder. Now the rudder lifts off. The dimly etched shoreline taunts, wavering close, slipping away. Where is the entrance to Stanley Harbour? “I canna do no more,” says Oates. The others agree: Their oars rest on the gunwales, water drips off the blades. Waves slap the bow, they rock, done in. *Climax. They’re at the end of their strength.*

This is when Lee Roddy announces we now let the white hat win the war. Resolution.

4) RESOLUTION: “Only through choices can a character usher in resolution for him or herself.”

The final, fourth cornerstone of fiction’s foundation is RESOLUTION.

Here’s the important thing about Resolution: Resolution, Lee teaches, occurs only through the decision and effort of the character. He or she *must* find his or her own way out of the dilemma. No fairy godmothers. No serendipity. Not even God.

Why?

Because, remember, fiction mirrors reality. Nothing is resolved until *we* make choices to seek resolution. I have a counseling friend who often has to tell his clients, “When you’re tired of suffering, come back and we’ll talk.” Harsh? Perhaps. But the reality is that no one can help until we choose to seek resolution, and thus usher in the beginning of the end and conflict resolved.

What about *Cinderella*? you ask. Was it *really* her fairy godmother who got her to the ball? Read the story again, and you’ll see that not until Cinderella decides for herself she *will* go can the fairy godmother appear and make it happen. Until then, not even God can help.

In *Fried Green Tomatoes*, Ruth says of her abusive husband: “I remembered having the same reaction after Frank would beat me, thanking the Lord for giving me the strength to take it.” Who wants to read a story of endurance within crisis? That’s not satisfactory. As readers, we’re looking for heroism. We need Ruth to rise above. *So we too can rise above our own trifling troubles.* Ruth does just this. “I was holding Buddy, and I thought if that bastard, Frank Bennett, ever tries to take my child, I won’t pray, I’ll break his neck.” She charted a different course and saved herself.

In *The Color Purple*, Celie decides to stand up to her abusive husband in a rather dramatic scene—she whips the carving knife out of the Thanksgiving turkey and puts it to his throat. This decision to alter her path is when she gains necessary power to effect resolution, thereby enabling her to give and find forgiveness.

This is not to say that our characters can’t have help. Cinderella did have her fairy godmother. Ruth had her support, and Celie had Shug. We all have our friends. But real resolution can’t happen until we first make the choice to rise above. The same for our characters. *They* must take a different path, explore a new idea, find inner strength, ask forgiveness.... Back them into a corner, force them to come out fighting or go down. And watch the magic and miracles happen.

Shipwreck! is a biographical novel I wrote, based on a captain’s wife’s diary. They’ve navigated 500 miles on a treacherous open sea without a chronometer, in a dingy. They’ve had to leave three men behind on an island, winter

coming on. Here are Falkland Islands, here are the British! But where is the opening to Stanley Harbour? It's too dark to see. They're being swept out to sea, and at the end of their strength. But they give it one last try.

"We'll be dead by morning," said Oates to Captain Wooldridge. "Steward first, then us."

"We are not dead yet," snapped the captain, suddenly done with their misery and his own. Corraling what strength and patience he had left, he said, "A little faith, men. Put in your oars." Blades dropped in. A weak, sloppy pull. Another, another. A shot rang out, bullet to the sky. Shivers ripped up everyone's spines and heads swiveled to meet the sky even as a spray of fire whistled overhead. Light poured and flashed, the whole of heaven lit, crimson, golden, white, red!

"A rocket!" cried Oates.

Another, and another! Shoreline leaped into view. Whiz! Whistle-whiz! Another and another, and to the west, lit by the bursts and gusts of light, the narrow opening between two low hills and entrance to Port Stanley!

"Dear God, we have been saved!" cried the captain. "Quick men, quick! Make all haste while we may yet see our way!"

Their oars sliced the water! Dip, pull, surge! Dip, pull, surge! Another rocket! Dip, pull, surge! Another and another, over and over the rockets flared, bursting in the air, red light bleeding to white, white streaking across the sky, illuminating the narrow channel, closer, closer: and then they were passing through!

Slowly, slowly, out of the clinging, murderous sea they rowed, slowly, slowly they skirted past the man-of-war and into the arms of an all-but-land-locked bay. Slowly, slowly and now silently they slid toward a distant, beckoning light. Slowly a stone jetty emerged from the dark. More slowly still the dark frame of a hulk loomed into view. Without strength they floated, without strength they butted the stone, a scraping, a crash and a bounce, and without strength they lost the oars from their hands, a quiet, clear splash.

The men chose to rally, and their lives were spared.

Conflict, Crisis, Climax, Resolution. Absolutely necessary cornerstones because—through the lives of our characters and by forcing them to navigate conflict and come out on top or drop dead—we give our readers and ourselves necessary encouragement and direction that will help us all navigate our own lives.

My friend, Don McQuinn, who wrote successfully within several genres, once told me: "In the end, you gotta write a story that rivets attention." Just look at *Gravity*. In the darkest moment of Bullock's despair, she chose to seek life in the face of death. She flipped all systems to go, consulted the handbooks, drew from her knowledge, limited it though it was, and blasted herself back to earth. A little far-fetched? Maybe. But conflict challenges us to go deeper, see farther, fight back, and redirect.

The stuff of which our lives are made.