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FICTION'S FOUNDATION: FOUR CORNESTONES

Conflict, Crisis, Climax, Resolution

My father, amongst many things, was a carpenter. When I was five years old, my two sisters and I were sitting on a backyard log watching Dad catwalk across the top of our “under construction” house, with shingle nails in his tool belt and hammer in his hand. My mother reports that I hollered up, “Daddy, you sure are building us a nice house!”

When I teach fiction, I use house construction as an analogy to describe every story’s construction. Like any house, fiction is built upon a solid foundation with four cornerstones. We call them:

CONFLICT...CRISIS...CLIMAX...RESOLUTION

Without these four elements there is no story.

1. CONFLICT

Lee Roddy, author of *Grizzly Adams*, the D. J. Dillion Series, and other books that have sold over 50,000,000 copies, says this: **“People come to see the fight, not the arena.”**

Most beginning writers make this mistake. Instead of hitting hard with conflict on page one, they spend page after page describing the arena. *Then* they get to the fight, the conflict. Sometimes they never do get around to it.

They instead build *fictional* walls without the *foundation*. The story inevitably will fall. Particularly in this day and age when all is action and danger. Without conflict, crisis, climax, and resolution, writers wind up with nothing more than a pile of paper.

Dave Lambert, former editor at Zondervan Publishers and currently editor at Somerault Group, author of ten books, says that when we write fiction we must **“Step into lives already full.”**

EXAMPLE: If a couple is arguing, we dare not describe the room, the clothing, the facial expressions. We must begin when the neighbor bangs on the door-- in the middle of the fight!

I fault myself when it comes to this. After I’d written most of *Sweetbriar*, I took a workshop from Lee. He had us all read the first 100 words of our book out loud in class. When I finished with

my golden prose, Lee said, “**Pretty words, Brenda. But they don’t say anything. Cut ‘em.**” *Sweetbriar* actually started at chapter 8!

- **Why is conflict so crucial?**

Conflict is critical because fiction is life’s mirror, reflecting back to the reader and our selves universal truth.

Is there anyone you know who has a peachy-keen life? No problems? Do you? Of course not. Scott Peck in his *The Road Less Traveled*, opens with “Life is difficult.”

This being true, then so must our fiction be difficult. We *must* make it hard on our characters if readers are to identify. It’s all about one step forward and two steps back.

EXAMPLES: *Sweetbriar*, Brenda Wilbee / opening sceneⁱ

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. (66 words)

Thetis Island, Brenda Wilbee / opening scene

A seagull’s shriek woke Theresa Parker, but the picture on the west wall was what really brought her awake.

“I can’t get away from you,” she whispered, her voice soft and lonely in the quiet of her first morning back at Thetis Island. (43 words)

Shipwreck, Brenda Wilbee / opening scene

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. (65 words)

2. CRISIS

We all know that conflict never gets better before it gets worse. We even have a saying for it: Murphy’s Law.

This is what Lee Roddy has to say: “After you put the protagonist and antagonist on stage,

let the black hat win all the battles.”

In other words, your protagonist has to get clobbered. Things have to get worse, and worse, and worse. In a psychological thriller you never let up. In other novels you let up a little, just to give

your poor reader a chance to breathe, but then you must ratchet up the tension again, this time harder.

This is how I kept escalating the conflict and creating crisis in *Shipwreck!*

EXAMPLE: *Shipwreck!* Brenda Wilbee

1. The crew signs up while drunk.
2. They wake up and find themselves “out to sea.”
3. They discover a woman is aboard. Every sailor knows it’s better *to sail on a Friday than sail with a woman!*
4. Ship catches fire. Men blame the woman.
5. Captain lands them safely—but on a remote island in the Antarctica.
6. They have two months to repair a longboat and make their escape. Winter’s closing in.
7. Men keep finding the liquor and getting drunk, Captain can hardly control them. Time is running out.
8. Captain becomes deathly ill, it’s up to Emily, the woman on board, to commandeer these fools and force them to keep plucking hemp and plugging the longboat’s gaping holes: their only hope of escape before winter sets in.
9. When they do take off, limited room in the longboat requires that three men remain behind. Will the others safely make it to the Falkland Islands 500 miles away on a buffeting sea? Without a chronometer? Without a quadrant?
10. Just as they come into reach of the Falklands, the small boat hits a rock and Steward—the only trustworthy crewman—is thrown overboard.
11. The Captain manages to haul the Steward in, but he’s unconscious and bleeding from the mouth and ears. They’re down a critical man.

Will they ever make it to safety? As writers, it’s our job to make it nigh unto impossible. Just think *Die Hard*.

We keep building tension by introducing crisis after crisis, mounting steadily toward the climax, **the ultimate battle when all is lost and there is no hope.**

3. CLIMAX

This is the night’s darkest hour before the dawn.

In the “sweet romance,” this is chapter 12.

In *Shipwreck!* the climax comes when the struggling crew can see the moonlit cliffs of Port Stanley but because the clouds are too thick, they can’t find the narrow opening between the jagged rocks and shelter.

EXAMPLE: *Sweetbriar!* Brenda Wilbee / p 270 of 299 pages

The wind was too weak to sail, the men too weak to row, the tide had turned. "Stand by to come about!" the captain urged. Again and again, spurred by the sight of Steward's unconscious body, they tried; to port, to starboard, tacking back and forth in search of even a pocket of wind, oars clumsily splashing the water. Then seaweed tangled in the rudder. The rudder lifted off. They rowed in circles. The shoreline, dimly etched, taunted, wavering in close and then slipping away. *Where was the opening to Stanley Harbor?*

Hours passed in useless circles, the night growing colder, darker, shoreline gone from sight, yet hauntingly near.

"I canna do no more," said Oates at last and the others agreed: Their oars rested on the gunwales, water dripped off the blades. Waves slapped the bow. On the sea they rocked. To a man, they were done in.

All appears lost. They've lost energy and hope. Or have they?

If LEE RODDY says to let the black hat win all the battles, he also says,

let the white hat win the war.

4. RESOLUTION

The final cornerstone of fiction's foundation is resolution. This is Lee Roddy's "let the white hat win the war."

- **Resolution *always* occurs through the efforts of the main character.**

He or she must find his or her own way out of the dilemma. No fairy godmothers, or in Christian writing, even God.

Why?

Because fiction mirrors reality. Nothing is resolved in our own lives until we make choices to seek resolution. "Ask and it shall be given you."

EXAMPLE: *Fried Green Tomatoes*

Ruth says: "I remembered having the same reaction after Frank would beat me, thanking the Lord for giving me the strength to take it, and I remembered thanking the Lord for each day that my mother lived, even when she was spitting up blood and praying for me to kill her. I looked in my mother's eyes, pleading with me to kill her, and all I could do was pray. While you were gone...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.**"

The Color Purple

It isn't until Celie decides to stand up to her husband—in that dramatic scene where she whips the knife out of the turkey and puts it to her husband's throat—**does she gain the power to effect change in her life.**

b) This is not say the main character can't have help.

We *all* have help in life—but only if we choose.

- If we choose to pray—God can intervene.
- If we choose to persevere—luck and/or natural consequences will happen.
- If we choose to step forward—our fairy godmothers work on our behalf.
- If we choose to be kind—others will respond in kind.
- If we choose to buy lottery tickets—one might pay off.

The same goes for our characters, but they must *choose*.

• Choosing isn't always a decision between “a” or “b.” It can be action.

In *Sweetbriar Spring*, Louisa befriends a “crazy” man. When her infant daughter is caught under the crush of a collapsing roof, the “crazy” man is the only man strong enough to get in there and lift the roof long enough to extract the baby. In this way, she effected her own resolution to the conflict.

In *Shipwreck!* I use a couple of things to bring on resolution. (Sometimes it takes a village.)

EXAMPLE: *Shipwreck!*

“We'll be dead by morning,” sighed Oates.

“We are not dead yet, Oates,” snapped the captain, done with their sorry misery and his own. Corralling what strength was left, he said, “A little faith, men. Put in your oars.”

He'd just dropped in his blade to try again when a shot rang out. A burst of gunfire, a shot of fire whistling overhead. Light exploded and flashed, the whole of heaven lit, crimson, golden, white, red!

“A rocket!” cried Oates. Shoreline leaped into view. Whiz! Whistle-whiz! Another, another. And to the west, lit by the bursts and gusts of light, the narrow opening between two low hills blinked into view—entrance to Port Stanley!

In this case, answered prayers and the sheer brute determination of Captain Wooldridge won the day. He pulled his men through and they were saved. But wait! What of the three men they left behind, 500 miles away?

Don't make resolution too easy.

- **Minor and Major Conflict**

A final word on conflict. We make a mistake when we think conflict is what we face. This is *minor* conflict. It's our reaction to what we face that is the *major* conflict. Minor, external conflict only serves to make us, as John Gardner says, stand up and be somebody; making decisions, and coming out with a win, loss, or a draw. It's the struggle and decision-making that's the real conflict we must require of our characters.

Minor Conflict = external, visible conflict
Major Conflict = internal, invisible conflict

It's these major and minor conflicts tumbling about, some resolving while others get worse—all generated by the main character—that create the solid foundation upon which all fiction stands.

So that's it: Conflict, Crisis, Climax, and Resolution. Get these cornerstones down, foundation for the whole. *Then* you can build the walls!

ⁱ I tend to use my own material to avoid copyright issues.