

Robin Perini on Braiding Character with Plot

By Linda Rohrbough

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At PPWC this year, I attended Robin Perini's session "Creating Your Story's Backbone." I was so impressed, I became a groupie, jumped on a last minute airfare to Ft. Lauderdale, Florida in May where Robin and her cohort Laura Baker did an entire Saturday seminar called Discovering Story Magic. Robin graciously took some time to fill me in about braiding characterization with plot.

I started by asking where do you begin in braiding characterization with plot so that the plot is a natural outgrowth of the characters? Robin said the way to determine the events that make up the plot turning points is to identify the strongest flaw in your character and find a way in the plot to attack the flaw. This intricately weaves the character and the plot. "You don't want a 'Perils of Pauline,' one dangerous but meaningless situation after another. It's about making your characters face their fears or their flaws," Robin said. "Plot is the means by which you put your character in pressure situations and force them to make decisions."

In braiding characterization and plot, your plot changes, the major turns and surprises, need to be an outgrowth of the personality and flaws of your characters, according to Robin. She recounted an incident that underlined this for her. "I was on a web forum, and someone said, 'I need some surprising plot turns in my story.' Everyone was throwing out ideas. But then someone got on there and asked, 'What are your character's fears or flaws?' No one was asking the right questions until that person came in."

Robin defines turning points in a plot or subplot as jumps--big, emotional scenes and stages--in the development of the character. To make the dramatic changes a character undergoes in the story believable requires tiny, small changes that lead to dramatic and escalating changes. "You have to train your character to face their flaw a piece at a time." She used the movie *LA Confidential* to illustrate. "The character Exley would have totally flipped if he'd found out he killed the wrong people in the beginning. The first thing that happened is he was made to see all cops are not knights in shining armor; there's dirt under there. In the course of the movie he realizes there's a chink in his own armor. Then you can actually take the movie to where he accepts Dudley as the bad guy. The truth is, he would have never accepted Dudley as the bad guy if he hadn't seen all this other stuff before hand. At the end, he shoots Dudley in the back, something he would never imagined doing in the beginning."

Robin quoted Lajos Egri in *The Art of Creative Writing* asking, "What should the writer strive for?" Then he answered himself by saying, "Characterization. Living, vibrating human beings are still the secret and magic formula of great and enduring writing." According to Robin, this is a fundamental truth of writing that hasn't changed. She said James Frey focused this idea even further. He said, in *How to Write a Damn Good Novel*, "In fiction, we put one or two aspects of life under our microscope, subject them to an eternal experiment called conflict, and then document what happens. A good dramatic story is a laboratory of human nature. It says something about some aspect of human life that the author believes deeply."

I asked what if I want to start with a plot idea? Robin didn't have a problem with working backwards from a plot idea. "But if you have a situation in your head, you want to look at the emotions that situation is going to evoke. You can start with a proverb like, 'the ends don't justify the means' and you can decide that's what your character learns. But you somehow have to take your idea and extract the character that will be the most deeply affected by that situation."

She added, "It's important to remember the amount your character cares about their goals is directly proportionate to how much the reader will care. It's all about the people, no matter what the plot is."

I said I didn't notice a lot of writers braiding character and plot. Robin agreed. "The truth of the matter is there are books out there that don't have these compelling elements. But they don't last. You don't keep a book on your shelf because it has a cool plot. You keep it because it has great characters. In *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* the compelling character is Charlie. In the *Wizard of Oz*, the theme is what you remember."

I said I did some braiding character and plot without knowing I was doing it and wondered if the masters of writing did the same. Robin closed with, "A lot of this is done instinctively. As a writer, you picked that antagonist because they were a contrast to your main character. You picked that imagery because it worked with the theme. But how cool if you can do it consciously and emphasize it even more!"

BIOS

Robin Perini is up again as a finalist in the Romance Writers Association Golden Heart Awards. She's been published in short non-fiction, and was on the committee that produced the LERA Writer's Guide recommended by Writers' Digest Books. She travels the country teaching writing workshops with award-winning romance author Laura Baker. Contact her at www.DiscoveringStoryMagic.com.

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