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LEVEL IDEA



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A Novel Idea: Best Advice on Writing Inspirational Fiction

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FOREWORD

Angela Hunt and Robin Jones Gunn

Spiritual serendipity is a wonderful thing. The book you hold in your hand was birthed on the way to a Five Guys hamburger restaurant because one of us (Robin) just happened to have a long-lost relative in the other's (Angela's) neighborhood, so we just happened to car-pool home after a convention, and we just happened to go out for a bite to eat, and we just happened to discuss how a group of novelists could help writers throughout the world by pulling together and donating some time and effort. . . .

The group of novelists in question was the group known as ChiLibris, which began on a hot Sunday afternoon in July 1999. Twenty-five novelists gathered for lunch during a Christian book-sellers' convention and had such a grand time together they decided to keep in touch via the Internet. Since that quiet beginning, the group has grown to nearly three hundred Christian novelists, all of whom are multipublished. So what might this group have to share with aspiring writers? Plenty, we thought. And the idea for this book was born.

But we know things don't "just happen." The God who directs our

A NOVEL IDEA

steps and has already recorded all of our days planned that moment of epiphany. He fired up Robin's tender heart for missions and combined it with Angela's penchant for organizing projects; he energized Janet Grant with enthusiasm and spurred Tyndale House Publishers to catch the vision. He gifted editor Jan Stob with patience and wisdom, and most of all, he inspired dozens of willing writers to give of themselves and their experience to help you . . . and, in so doing, to aid writers around the world who seek to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with others.

We're wondering if the fact that you are now holding this book might be a "God thing" as well. Have you long sensed an urge to tell stories? Do you delight in capturing words and turning them into images on a blank page? Have others often told you, "You should be a writer"? When given the opportunity, do your thoughts and feelings come together to weave stories that stay tucked away inside? You may well be a novelist, and now may well be the time to pursue that possibility.

Listen to this portion of Galatians 6 from *The Message*. These verses make a fitting exhortation for all writers:

Make a careful exploration of who you are and the work you have been given, and then sink yourself into that. Don't be impressed with yourself. Don't compare yourself with others. Each of you must take responsibility for doing the creative best you can with your own life.

There's nothing quite like the thrill of seeing the body of Christ in action. It is our hope and prayer that the articles in this book will help you learn to better communicate stories that can reach hearts

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and change lives. And by purchasing this book, know that you are furthering the work of Media Associates International, an organization dedicated to training Christian publishers and writers in difficult places around the globe. All those who contributed to this book have agreed that the entire proceeds from sales will go to MAI to provide international training. You can check out what MAI is doing to further the gospel through Christian publishing by visiting www.littworld.org.

What do you think? Are you ready to take responsibility for doing your creative best? May the spiritual serendipity in your writing life begin!

INTRODUCTION



Why Fiction? *Sharon Hinck*

Sweat prickled on Nathan's forehead and ran down toward his beard. The shade of the palace throne room did little to ease the Mediterranean heat. His knees trembled with age and fear, yet his voice rang clear as he addressed the king. "There were two men in a certain town . . . but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb."

God sent a prophet as his vehicle to convict King David of his sin. Nathan told a story, and David's heart was pierced.

Now that was a good day for fiction.

We spend most of our hours using direct, specific, nonfiction words. We ask our children to do their chores, tell our friends about the things we saw yesterday, and go about the business of life in the commonsense place of literal conversation. Pastors and teachers communicate effectively in sermons and lessons. Christian writers share principles to help us walk the path of following Christ.

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So why has God called so many of his children today to write fiction? Why did Jesus augment his teaching and preaching with storytelling? Can a novel be a vibrant and valuable art form for the Christian writer?

As Christians, we constantly struggle to utter the unutterable. We long to share concepts beyond our human ability to understand—the transcendence of God’s holiness, the potency of forgiveness, the depth of God’s love for us. Fiction helps us find ways to express those truths of magnitude because it is relatable, symbolic, and engages the emotion—unique qualities that make it a vital art form.

FICTION IS RELATABLE

Fiction weaves truth into slice-of-life depictions to which readers can relate. It provides a touchstone to common experiences of humanity and a way to examine those experiences. When Jesus sat on a grassy slope surrounded by the hurting, he painted word pictures—salt, lamps, bread, rusting treasure.

One time he told a simple story: “A woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully?” The women sitting at his feet smiled and nodded. They understood that experience. They’d felt it. Jesus built on that connection. “In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” The story helped the listeners understand how much God valued them.

FICTION USES THE POWER OF SYMBOL AND METAPHOR

The harsh sound of fabric ripping punctuated the words of the prophet Ahijah as he stood alone on a dusty road with Jeroboam. “This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘See, I am going to

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tear the kingdom out of Solomon's hand.” Old Testament prophets often used dramatic re-creation and shared the metaphors that God gave them to speak. Scarlet sin turned white as snow. An unfaithful wife bought back. A golden statue with feet of clay.

When Jesus stood on the wet and rocking planks of a boat on the Sea of Galilee, he also used the poetic language of symbols. “A sower went out to sow his seed. . . .” Gathered in a crowded home, he leaned back and told stories. “I am the good shepherd.” “I will make you fishers of men.” “You are the light of the world.”

God's use of symbol and metaphor gives us a way to make connections and gain a deeper understanding of his truth. When we write stories, we follow his model.



NOTHING IS WASTED

God never wastes an experience or trial in our lives. Good or bad, easy or painful, he is able to use everything in our lives to grow us and make us more like him. And he gives us the privilege of encouraging others along this same journey.

We simply need eyes to see and the willingness to open our lives. Then we can help others through the power of fiction. My writing mentor calls it “bleeding into your work.” It's as if you open yourself up and pour into your work everything that makes you who you are. All the joy. The pain. The questions asked. The lessons learned.

It's not for the faint of heart. Oftentimes it's painful. But it's worth the struggle.

When we as writers take our fears, beliefs, imaginations, and research and offer them up for the Lord to use, we are changed, and our fiction carries the power of truth and the fingerprints of our God on every page.

—Amy Wallace

FICTION ENGAGES EMOTION

Stories also touch the emotions. When God sent Nathan to confront David about his sin, the poignant story of the cruel landowner killing his neighbor's pet lamb broke through David's defenses and stirred his heart—allowing the Holy Spirit to further the work of repentance.

In the farming communities of Galilee, Jesus' story about the sower and the seed stirred a longing to be the good soil that “produced

a crop—a hundred, sixty, or thirty times what was sown.”

What traveler could listen to the tale of the Good Samaritan and not have their emotions engaged by the plight of the man who was beaten and robbed?

God designed us as beings with emotion as well as intellect. A well-crafted novel or short story touches readers on both levels.

Fiction explores the truth of human experience, deepens understanding of life through symbol and metaphor, and touches the heart. In order to provide that powerful experience, it helps to keep in mind a few elements most readers

TO WRITE

You hold the pen of hope and
healing,
you who tell of fear and feeling.
Power to touch the jaded soul;
power to make the broken whole.
To entertain, to intertwine,
to take us back in tests and time.
Write you must—now go from here;
write and keep the Savior near.
Now, Spirit, lead us every page;
through our words, be center stage.
Give us love for those who read;
give us words so they might see.
Author God, now through your
power
guide us from this very hour.
Let us tell of love and light
and grant us strength so we might
write.

—Karen Kingsbury

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look for in a novel: entertainment, explanation, encouragement, and experience.

FOUR GIFTS OF FICTION

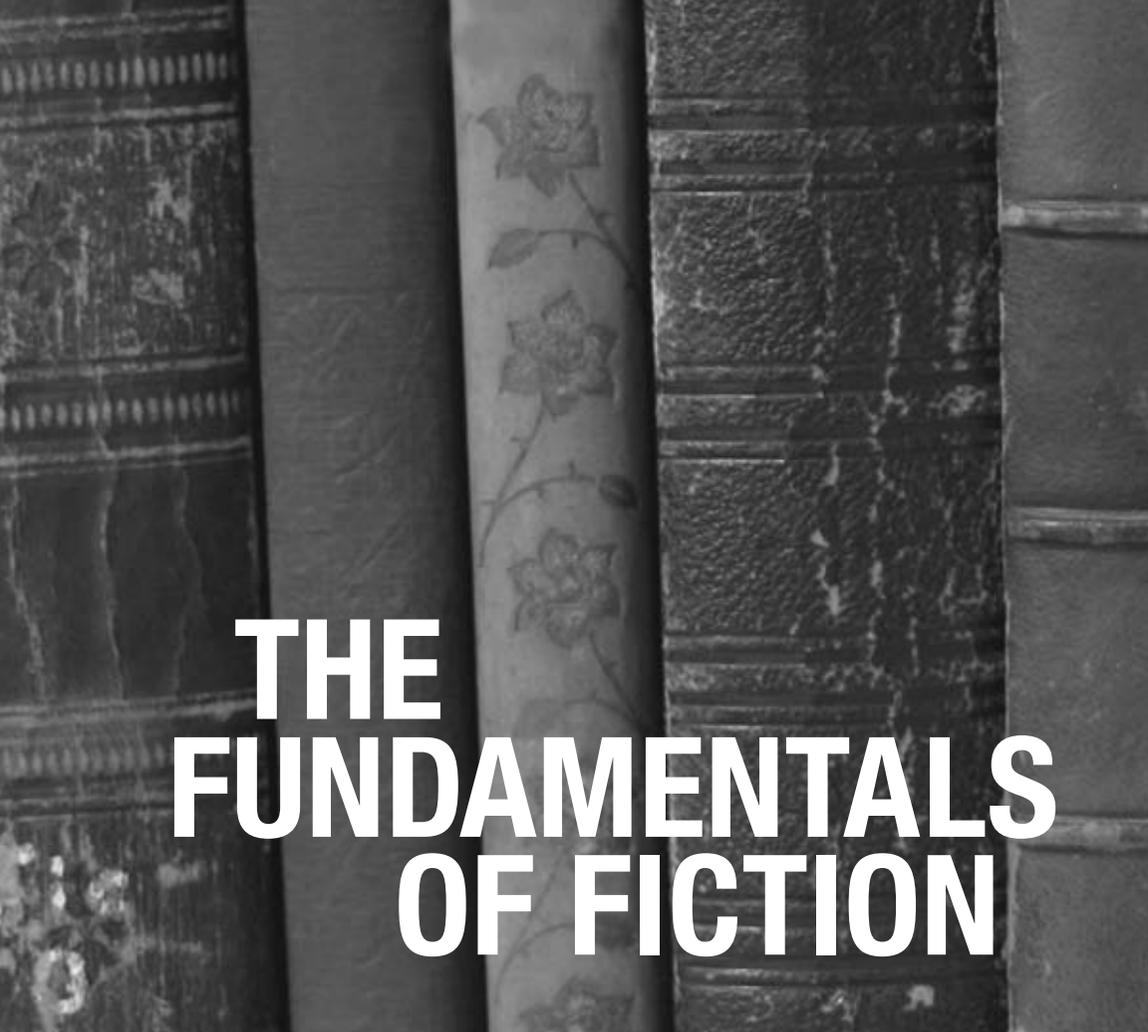
- **Entertainment.** People turn to stories to relax, to rest, and to shift their minds into a playful place. Reading is a form of recreation that strengthens imagination and empathy. Play is part of a healthy human existence, and entertainment that can bring refreshment in a way that honors God is a precious gift.
- **Explaining our world.** Through recorded history, people have told stories to help make sense of their experiences. It's vital that those of us who know the love of God be among the storytellers in our cultures. As a character grapples with questions, the reader can also explore those themes.
- **Encouragement and connection.** C. S. Lewis said, "We read to know we are not alone." My favorite letters from readers are the ones that say, "That's exactly how I feel, but I didn't know how to put it into words." Whether a mom identifies with the supermom syndrome of *The Secret Life of Becky Miller* or the journey toward emotional health of *Stepping into Sunlight*, fictional characters can reassure us that many of our struggles are universal.
- **Experiencing a new perspective.** When we read a powerfully written novel, we enter the skin of a new person. We feel her struggles and celebrate her triumphs. We watch her grow, and we grow with her. While stories meet our need to feel connected to someone similar to us, they can also help us understand someone who is different. We come out the other side of the book changed.

WRITING FICTION

In a letter to his lifelong friend Arthur Greeves, C.S. Lewis wrote, “I am sure that some are born to write as trees are born to bear leaves: for these, writing is a necessary mode of their own development.” For all of you who are “born to write” and might not yet believe that calling, this book is for you. Ask God what he is inviting you to do with all those stories you’ve kept tucked away inside. Learn all you can about the craft of writing. Take those all-important first steps of trusting God in a new way and see what happens. The published novelists who generously contributed to this project want you to know that we stand with you. Along the way we have learned a thing or two about what works when refining the art of storytelling and what doesn’t. On these pages you will find many of those helpful tips along with much thoughtful advice and direction.

Offering the gift of fiction to readers can take as many different forms as there are different writers: humorous voices or melancholy voices; overt themes of faith or subtle hints of spiritual threads; stories to introduce aspects of God to those who don’t know him or tales designed to encourage and challenge Christian readers. God is so awesome and so multifaceted that we need a variety of means to communicate about him. Every genre contributes something to the wealth of fiction—literary, mystery, historical, thriller, women’s fiction, fantasy, science fiction, contemporary, and more.

Whichever kind of fiction God calls you to write, it can give new glimpses of him and serve his Kingdom on earth, and that makes every day a good day for fiction.



THE FUNDAMENTALS OF FICTION

PART ONE >

CHAPTER 1

PLOT



The Plot Skeleton

Angela Hunt

Imagine, if you will, that you and I are sitting in a room with one hundred other authors. If you were to ask each person present to describe their plotting process, you'd probably get a hundred different answers. Writers' methods vary according to their personalities, and we are all different. Mentally. Emotionally. Physically.

If, however, those one hundred novelists were to pass behind an X-ray machine, you'd discover that we all possess remarkably similar skeletons. Beneath our disguising skin, hair, and clothing, our skeletons are pretty much identical.

In the same way, though writers vary in their methods, good stories are composed of remarkably comparable skeletons. Stories with "good bones" can be found in picture books and novels, plays and films.

Many fine writers tend to carefully outline their plots before they

begin the first chapter. On the other hand, some novelists describe themselves as “seat-of-the-pants” writers. But when the story is finished, a seat-of-the-pants novel will (or should!) contain the same elements as a carefully plotted book. Why? Because whether you plan it from the beginning or find it at the end, novels need structure beneath the story.

After mulling several plot designs and boiling them down to their basic elements, I developed what I call the “plot skeleton.” It combines the spontaneity of seat-of-the-pants writing with the discipline of an outline. It requires a writer to know where he’s going, but it leaves room for lots of discovery on the journey.

When I sit down to plan a new book, the first thing I do is sketch my smiling little skeleton.

To illustrate the plot skeleton in this article, I’m going to refer frequently to *The Wizard of Oz* and a lovely foreign film you may never have seen, *Mostly Martha*.

THE SKULL: A CENTRAL CHARACTER

The skull represents the main character, the protagonist. A lot of beginning novelists have a hard time deciding who the main character is, so settle that question right away. Even in an ensemble cast, one character should be featured more than the others. Your readers want to place themselves into your story world, and it’s helpful if you can give them a sympathetic character to whom they can relate. Ask yourself, “Whose story is this?” That is your protagonist.

This main character should have two *needs* or *problems*—one obvious, one hidden—which I represent by two yawning eye sockets.

Here’s a tip: Hidden needs, which usually involve basic human emotions, are often solved or met by the end of the story. They are at

PLOT

the center of the protagonist's "inner journey," or character change, while the "outer journey" is concerned with the main events of the plot. Hidden needs often arise from wounds in a character's past.

Consider *The Wizard of Oz*. At the beginning of the film, Dorothy needs to save her dog from Miss Gulch, who has arrived to take Toto because he bit her scrawny leg—a very straightforward and obvious problem. Dorothy's *hidden* need is depicted but not directly emphasized when she stands by the pigpen and sings "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." Do children live with Uncle Henry and Aunt Em if all is fine with Mom and Dad? No. Though we are not told what happened to Dorothy's parents, it's clear that something has splintered her family, and Dorothy's unhappy. Her hidden need, the object of her inner journey, is to find a place to call home.

Mostly Martha opens with the title character lying on her therapist's couch and talking about all that is required to cook the perfect pigeon. Since she's in a therapist's office, we assume she has a problem, and the therapist addresses this directly: "Martha, why are you here?"

"Because," she answers, "my boss will fire me if I don't go to therapy." Ah—obvious problem at work with the boss. Immediately we also know that Martha is high-strung. She is precise and politely controlling in her kitchen. This woman lives for food, but though she assures us in a voice-over that all a cook needs for a perfectly lovely dinner is "fish and sauce," we see her venture downstairs to ask her new neighbor if he'd like to join her for dinner. He can't, but we become aware that Martha needs company. She needs love in her life.

CONNECT THE SKULL TO THE BODY: INCITING ACTION

Usually the first few chapters of a novel are involved with the business of establishing the protagonist in a specific time and place, his

PART ONE: THE FUNDAMENTALS OF FICTION

world, his needs, and his personality. The story doesn't kick into gear, though, until you move from the skull to the spine, a connection known as the *inciting incident*.

Writers are often told to begin the story *in medias res*, or in the middle of the action. This is not the same as the Big Incident. Save the big event for a few chapters in, after you've given us some time to know and understand your character's needs. Begin your story with an obvious problem—some action that shows how your character copes. In the first fifth of the story we learn that Dorothy loves Toto passionately and that Martha is a perfectionist chef. Yes, start in the middle of something active, but hold off on the big event for a while. Let us get to know your character first . . . because we won't gasp about their dilemma until we know them.

In a picture book, the inciting incident is often signaled by two words: *One day* . . . Those two words are a natural way to move from setting the stage to the action. As you plot your novel, ask yourself, "One day, what happens to move my main character into the action of the story?" Your answer will be your inciting incident, the key that turns your story engine.

After Dorothy ran away, if she'd made it home to Uncle Henry and Aunt Em without incident, there would have been no story. The inciting incident? When the tornado picks Dorothy up and drops her, with her house, in the land of Oz.

The inciting incident in *Mostly Martha* is signaled by a ringing telephone. When Martha takes the call, she learns that her sister, who was a single mother to an eight-year-old girl, has been killed in an auto accident.

Think of your favorite stories—how many feature a hero who's reluctant to enter the special world? Often—but not always—your

PLOT

protagonist doesn't want to go where the inciting incident is pushing him or her. Obviously, Martha doesn't want to hear that her sister is dead, and she certainly doesn't want to be a mother. She takes Lina, her niece, and offers to cook for her (her way of showing love), but Lina wants her mother, not gourmet food.

Even if your protagonist has actively pursued a change, he or she may have moments of doubt as the entrance to the special world looms ahead. When your character retreats or doubts or refuses to leave the ordinary world, another character should step in to provide encouragement, advice, information, or a special tool. This will help your main character overcome those last-minute doubts and establish the next part of the skeleton: the goal.

THE END OF THE SPINE: THE GOAL

At some point after the inciting incident, your character will establish and state a goal. Shortly after stepping out of her transplanted house, Dorothy looks around Oz and wails, "I want to go back to Kansas!" She's been transported over the rainbow, but she prefers the tried and true to the unfamiliar and strange. In order to go home, she'll have to visit the wizard in the Emerald City. As she tries to meet an ever-shifting set of subordinate goals (follow the yellow brick road; overcome the poppies; get in to see the wizard; bring back a broomstick), her main goal keeps viewers glued to the screen.

This overriding concern—will she or won't she make it home?—is known as the *dramatic question*. The dramatic question in every murder mystery is, *Who committed the crime?* The dramatic question in nearly every thriller is, *Who will win the inevitable showdown between the hero and the villain?* Along the way readers will worry about the subgoals (*Will the villain kill his hostage? Will the hero figure out the*

clues?), but the dramatic question keeps them reading until the last page.

Tip: To keep the reader involved, the dramatic question should be directly related to the character's ultimate goal. Martha finds herself trying to care for a grieving eight-year-old who doesn't want another mother. So Martha promises to track down the girl's father, who lives in Italy. She knows only that his name is Giuseppe, but she's determined to find him.

THE RIB CAGE: COMPLICATIONS

Even my youngest students understand that a protagonist who accomplishes everything he or she attempts is a colorless character. As another friend of mine is fond of pointing out, as we tackle the mountain of life, it's the bumps we climb on! If you're diagramming, sketch at least three curving ribs over your spine. These represent the *complications* that must arise to prevent your protagonist from reaching his goal.

Why at least three ribs? Because even in the shortest of stories—in a picture book, for instance—three complications work better than two or four. I don't know why three gives us such a feeling of completion, but it does. Maybe it's because God is a Trinity and we're hardwired to appreciate that number.

While a short story will have only three complications, a movie or novel may have hundreds. Complications can range from the mundane—John can't find a pencil to write down Sarah's number—to life-shattering. As you write down possible complications that could stand between your character and his ultimate goal, place the more serious problems at the bottom of the list.

The *stakes*—what your protagonist is risking—should increase in