

**Willamette Writers 2014 Conference
Portland, Aug 1-3**

SEMINAR NOTES

Lee Baldwin

OVERALL

Three separate seminars on the creative memoir signaled that's a coming genre these days.

BELOW ARE MY NOTES, THINGS I FOUND INTERESTING

8:30 AM FRIDAY 3 AGENT PANEL

Saritz Hernandez, Sarke Fairbank, Gordon Warnock

WHAT AGENTS ARE NOT LOOKING FOR

MS that is not ready, such as too generic, no spark, too flat, a mini-story with lots of words

AGENTS WANT:

Para 1 had better be the hook of the book

MS where reader can have a dialogue with the page.

Submissions need a Log Line that is the premise of the title, word count, complete or not, if you used an editor. Give basics first

Introduce your story with confidence, agents are looking for first reason to say no.

Publishers and agents these days want writers to do the marketing – looking for your platform and a robust author bio

#mswl – twitter hashtag = manuscript wish list where agents chat about what they are looking for NOW.

Log into Twitter account. Enter #mswl in the search box. You see a thread where agents post their MS wants.

10:30 FRIDAY LARRY BROOKS – IDEA, CONCEPT, PREMISE, AND THEME

Brooks writes novels – at storyfix.com he posts about what a story is and isn't

Structure, story engineering, story physics

A story IDEA is generally about HOW.

THEME is what a story says or concludes about a subject

PREMISE: the central idea, an intriguing set-up or a situation that makes people curious to read further... a what-if kind of question.

PREMISE is usually brief, provocative, framed as a provocative 'what if'... contains a character, a conflict and a hook, reveals a larger world, contains broad appeal, 25 – 35 words max, an idea that jumps out at you, a picture or image of something interesting, gets you passionate about the idea, in the present tense, accessible to a 15 year old.

A CONCEPT is a framework for a story. It has no character, no action, no plot. It is a field of possibilities.

CONCEPT moves from the situational to the actionable.

A CONCEPT asks a question within a context... it suggests an answer that leads to the story.

A CONCEPT is an evolved IDEA, a snapshot of the story.

If the idea is fly an airplane, the concept could be, fly a stealth fighter through dense artillery fire in Iraq.

If the idea is: gymnast down on her luck, the concept could be: a gymnast loses her leg at the knee but perseveres through pain and prejudice to become a professional performer/Olympian/Cirque de Soleil artist.

The STORY is the execution of the CONCEPT. It's an engrossing look into a world and/or character at the moment of fundamental change or resolution of a conflict. The story tells about a character confronting a challenge. Story is about a protagonist who wants to achieve something through opposition with much at stake. If there are no stakes, if there is no conflict, there will be no story.

A STORY asks a dramatic question through high stakes from a conceptual framework.

If you start writing a story without clear knowing of idea, premise, concept, and theme, it's unlikely you'll be able to generate an engrossing story.

ELEVATOR PITCH can start with your concept then develop

6 core competencies a writer must develop:

Concept, character, theme, story structure/architecture, scene construction and execution, writing voice.

6 realms of story physics:

- 1) core story essence (the power of your initial *premise*)
- 2) dramatic tension
- 3) pace
- 4) empathy for protagonist
- 5) the vicarious journey
- 6) narrative strategy

Here are Larry's backup notes for his 3 talks.

WARNING lots of fluff.

<http://storyfix.com/friday-story-101>

<http://storyfix.com/saturday-morning-version-of-the-heros-journey>

<http://storyfix.com/sunday-side-notes>

1:30 FRI HALLE EPHRON CRAFTING A PAGE TURNER NOVEL

Story is about something a character needs and what she is willing to go through to get it.

Examples of page turner novels

Hunger Games – Collins

Gone Girl – Flynn

DaVinci Code – Brown

Girl with the Dragon Tattoo – Larsson

Elements of a Page Turner

Compelling idea and concept

Main character the reader cares about

Something important at stake that is high and personal for the protagonist.

Time pressure

Suspense and action

PREMISE

What if a tornado separates a young girl from her family and whisks her away? (Wizard of Oz)

What if strangers who meet on a train agree to kill each other's wives? (Strangers on a Train)

What if a wife disappears and her husband's odd behavior and her diary suggest he killed her? (Gone Girl)

Characters with competing goals

Wizard of Oz:

Protagonist and goal... Dorothy wants to find the ruby slippers and go home

Villain and goal... the Wicked Witch wants power and the ruby slippers

Antagonist and goal... the wizard gets in the way without any ill will toward Dorothy

GOAL must be a tangible symbol (at least it's easier if tangible instead of something like freedom, peace in the world, love, etc.) An event or a prize.

In Wizard of Oz the tangible goal is the ruby slippers, a symbol for power.

PLOT and CHARACTER

3-Act Plot Structure

Tension and stakes increase over time

Characters have competing goals

Move between equilibrium and escalating disequilibrium (everything's fine, but wait a minute...)

Tent Poles of Plot

Opening scene that hooks the reader (forward momentum)

Major plot twist at end of ACT I, a surprise or reversal

Middle of ACT II: Major plot twist

End of ACT II: Character descends into their most beaten-down state, physically and psychologically

Climax of action

End of ACT III: everything tied together

Plot amplified by character

Dorothy's transformation (Oz):

In the beginning she wants to go home. By the end she wants the ruby slippers. What is her transformation?

The Hook

Intriguing situation, Compelling Characters, Unanswered Question.

Don't let the opening steal your novel's thunder.

Where not to start your novel

Synopsis instead of dramatic action

Backstory dump

Scene Outline

Chet is driving home for dinner with his wife. He parks, picks up his mail, takes elevator (establishing narrative).

He walks down the hall, notices door to his apartment is open (event)

He opens the door, finds all the furniture gone, only thing in the place is a red stiletto heel. (change)

Chet calls police (event).

While he waits for cops, tries to puzzle out what has happened (reflection).

Realizes the shoe belongs to his mistress (change).

Cops arrive, he tries to hide the shoe (move plot forward).

By the end of every scene, something emotional, relational, or situational should have changed.

Where to start a scene

As late as possible into the action

Orient the reader, anchor the characters

Avoid disembodied dialogue

Where to end a scene

As early as possible (don't ramble after your big revelation for that scene)

With forward momentum from revelation, some anticipation, an unanswered question.

Keep them reading

Develop suspense by slowing things down and amping up the anticipation.

Develop action by speeding things up, adding time pressure and momentum

Write the fast parts slow and the slow parts fast. (Spend more words on your quick revealing action and fewer words on the dull stuff)

PANEL: NEXT FIVE YEARS OF PUBLISHING

Kelly Kittel, Julie Fast, Tom Corson-Knowles, Linda Needham

These folks are strong on self-publishing, claim the traditional press can't compete with authors. Talk about social media and author platform. They say with traditional publishing you have to do all those things yourself anyway, the publisher only tells you to do them.

There is a way to produce an Amazon Spike Day but they didn't go into that. Search it.

Follow twitter groups in profession you want to hear about

You need the skills to find an audience in the face of thousands of competitors

The book itself is changing to suit the new media. Hybrid publishing, or Apps, supposed to be the coming thing. Interactive books... A book with text that also includes video and cartoons, photography, artwork. Says the likely platform will be the iPad. Possible branching feature, reader chooses the path of the story.

SheWrites press (Kelly Kittel) – author-subsidized publishing.

Invest in pre-pub costs then take 70% off back end.

Your book cover must therefore look good on a phone.

Your estate keeps rights to your work 90 years after you die.

Twitter is the path to fame more than Facebook Instagram etc. Learn to tweet like a sports pro.

Follow the gaming industry model. Graphic novel form.

If you have decent encryption software you can sell from own shopping cart on own website.

If a book is spiral bound no limit on price. Indicating the appeal of more small-press titles in self help, medicine, special skills.

Ebookpublishingschool.com

Erotic romance, you have to learn to love the Twitter crap.

DON'T need a long range plan, you need:

- what is my goal

- what is my next step

Luke Ryan: Second half of ACT II

Luke was Associate Producer for Martian Child, ditto for King's Ransom, exec producer for Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle

Books run out of gas in second act because:

You haven't got your concept, them, and premise sorted out.

Too thin – story runs out of steam

Character is not changing – must know and portray character arc

No revelation about theme

Lacks narrative momentum into ACT III – what is the proverbial explosion that launches third act?

THEME or meta-message = A full sentence on a clear point of view on how to live your life. (To me he sounded rather 'Hollywood' around this point.)

Theme is a moral argument you can tie to character arc. Characters flawed, not living the right way, resistant to message in theme.

(This sounds to me quite moralizing as a definition, but then Ryan's a Hollywood producer.)

ACT 2 second half brings protagonist face to face with a reward or a quest, seizing the sword a la Joseph Campbell. Bad guys are closing in and it's your hero's dark night of the soul. Character is physically and psychologically beaten down, the stakes are going up and her chances are going down. Characters at this point must face their own flaws in a way that bring them to a meaningful life change.

Good place to plant a reversal for climax, reveal to reader something protagonist does not yet know.

Inciting incident = first sign in story of the inevitable conflict between protagonist and villain

Climax = escalate and inform conflict, it's the moment villain tests protagonist at greatest level

1. why is this character most challenged by your villain?
2. Why (or how) is protagonist specifically designed to be most challenged?

Reveal these in first act and escalate

Refusal of call = why does protagonist's backstory prevent accepting challenge at first?

Gauntlet = series of challenges, intense tests, hero in crumpled heap, you see the pure essence of her soul.

Visit to Death = resurrection, stare into abyss. My life is finite, if it will stand for anything I have to change, be reborn into climactic battle. Adaptable morals or acceptance of fate, the ideal becomes more important than life itself.

Hidden reversal – protagonist achieved growth of resurrection, hidden danger attacks her greatest weakness and helps villain. Greatest psychological pressure in climactic battle.

SUSPENSE = reader knows of danger the protagonist does not.

Eileen Cook : Make War not Peace, Increasing Conflict in Your Fiction

Self-published 9 adult novels

Uses conflict resolution strategies turned on their heads to create conflict in lit.

Conflict rises, hero not in best state to cope.

Turn it around – what's best for conflict resolution is NOT best for a story. Readers don't want a pleasant day in the park, they want to FEEL how your character solves problems under stress.

A PITCH IS a story about a character who seeks a goal, and conflict gets in the way. You are already not published so don't sweat pitching and querying.

MAKE YOUR STORY ABOUT YOUR CHARACTER. Seems obvious, the slush pile is full of stories that are about something else.

AGENTS WANT TO SEE = destination of story

NEEDS people often have no idea what they need. Her dad will love her more if she succeeds at X, but she resists by thinking she doesn't need her father's approval.

LOVE as a story goal is too vague. BUT WHAT WOULD LOVE LOOK LIKE – when character has those answers, those are story goals. Ask yourself how will the character know if they get it?

Opposite – lose love of last living elder, lose job, lose hope, lose family

How can your main character want both of those things simultaneously: lose weight and want a cookie. When character wants a thing and its opposite you get internal conflict.

REVERSAL = outside forces cause hero's priorities to change.

Hero can make even a wrong choice for a good reason.

Other characters challenge hero's worldview all the time

Love your characters but be prepared to hurt them. They can't entertain you or the reader without pain.

All the below are wrong or reversed ways of handling conflict resolution.

PICK WORST TIME AND PLACE FOR SOMEONE TO SAY SOMETHING CRITICAL TO HERO

WHO IS THE WORST PERSON TO SEE YOUR HERO HUMILIATED?

YOUR HERO MISINTERPRETS OUTSIDE EVENTS

BELIEF MORE IMPORTANT THAN REALITY

CHARACTERS DON'T ALWAYS HEAR ONE ANOTHER CORRECTLY

CHARACTERS DON'T MAINTAIN EMOTIONAL CONTROL – rising verbal tension

CHARACTERS ACCUSE EACH OTHER

CHARACTERS DRAG IN THE PAST

WHAT HAPPENED IN CHARACTER'S PAST THAT HURTS THEM AND SHAPES THEIR WORLD?

WHAT ALLIES DOES YOUR HERO WANT ON HER SIDE?

WHAT DOES HERO THINK SHE WILL LOSE IF DOESN'T GET WHAT SHE WANTS? BELIEF

YOU ALMOST CAN'T HAVE ENOUGH CONFLICT.

WHEN YOUR CHARACTER IS IN TROUBLE, THINK HOW YOU CAN MAKE IT WORSE.

WHAT IS LIMIT YOUR CHARACTER CAN TAKE?

HALLIE EPHRON – Make the Reader Care

Maltese Falcon, Gone Girl her 2 examples for:

- Unexpected plot twists
- Development of protagonist
- Strategic reveal of character's backstory

Shapiro, The Art Forger

- omniscient 3rd person narrator
- camera inside narrator's head
- camera on Sam Spade (Maltese Falcon)
- Spade's tic is rolling a cigarette
- tough guy little introspection
- who is narrator for Maltese Falcon? Ephron said it's unusual but I'm reading the book now and it seems normal.

In Gone Girl, both Amy and Nick are untrustworthy and unlikable. Margo, Nick's sister, is likable and she humanizes Nick as his foil. Amy is humanized by the backstory in her diary.

Dark female characters are hot in lit these days.

What's sympathetic is a character who's trying to get it right this time.