



How Do You Build Great Plots?

From characters, not clichés

Part one of a series about plotting from character.

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We've all read it (and written it) — that scene where the heroine does something really stupid because the plot needs her to be at risk.

Or what about that moment when you can't think what happens next — say, right after the heroine and hero make love for the first time — and all you can come up with is them bickering over a misunderstanding because you need conflict?

Contrived. That's how those scenes read. But there's a better way to create a tighter, more believable story. By plotting from character.

To do this, you create the action (or beats) for your story from the inside out. Your characters will come across as well motivated, and this'll give you some great plot twists because they come from character not cliché.

To start on the inside, start at the deepest point: for every character in your story (hero, heroine, secondary folks and villains) find out that person's core need. This goes beyond a tangible goal, such as to be rich.

This is what Debra Dixon in *Goal, Motivation, Conflict* calls a motivating force. For example, maybe the heroine needs a place to belong, because she grew up with an alcoholic father and her parents' divorce when she was twelve left her feeling like she didn't fit in anywhere. As you can see, when you identify this core need, you also need a reason for how it arose.

Quick Tips

- **Give every character a secret.** This may or may not come out. Either way, it shapes the character.
- **Let characters surprise you.** If a character goes off in some direction, let 'em. It'll keep the writing fresh for you and the reader.
- **Focus the story on one character's specific growth.** In a romance, both the hero and the heroine will have to move from a person for whom a relationship is not possible. However, one character will have the greatest growth — that character should be the focus of the book.
- **Know your main characters' sexual histories.** Your hero and heroine need to be compatible sexually, so it's good to know how they complement each other, and how there might be conflict in experience, comfort zones, and willingness to experiment.

Orson Scott Card in *Character and Viewpoint* recommends that when looking for motivations for your character's core need, discard the first two or three ideas. These impulses pop up because they're overused — you've seen them a lot. As in, the hero doesn't want to get married because a woman betrayed him (yawn). Instead, stretch a little.

Maybe you start with a hero betrayed by a woman — but how did he end up with a woman who would dump him? Maybe he's deeply insecure due to having grown up short and fat (before he shot up to six foot and trimmed down), so he picks women who'll leave him because it reinforces his self-image.

Or maybe he had a repressive

childhood and flaky women represent a freedom he craves — but they also leave him. Or maybe he grew up a foster kid and has thick walls about commitment, so women end up "dumping" him because he's not emotionally available.

As you dig deeper, you'll get a more complex character. This means a stronger plot. An important factor is that core needs developed in early years always resonate the strongest with readers, creating the most sympathetic characters.

Once you have the core need and why it's there, now set up a potential mate who can't provide that need, but who is still attracted to that person and by that person.

Let's pick up with that heroine who wants a house because of the 'belonging' it represents. This means we need a house in the story. And we need to hook her up with someone who doesn't want to belong.

So how about that hero who's looking for freedom (and has been looking for it in flaky women who leave him). Give them both a house — a joint inheritance — and now they're ready to clash. She wants it for a home. He wants the money from it for the freedom it'll buy him.

Now we have internal and external conflict going — and the start of a plot.

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