Section 1, Thrill Me: Creating the Momentum That Publishers Crave

Write-by-the-Lake Writer’s Workshop & Retreat
June 15-19, 2015
9:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m. each day
Pyle Center, 702 Langdon St., Madison

UW-Madison Continuing Studies & UW-Madison Dept. of English

Instructor: Tim Storm

At the end of the day it’s simple: what publishers and agents want is writing they can’t set down. This goes for memoirs and character-driven literary stories as much as it goes for thrillers and spy novels. If you want to avoid rejection letters that claim your piece was “not compelling enough,” or “just didn’t grab me,” you need to get the proverbial ball rolling and then keep it rolling. This course will examine various techniques to achieve maximum momentum in your writing. Suspense, surprise, tension; mystery, anticipation, high stakes--we’ll sort out these various methods of moving your piece forward and we'll also examine stuff that might stall your narrative, like background and flashback and set-up. How do you get all that crucial information into a story without killing the momentum? Come find out.

Throughout the week, we’ll provide examples of both successful and unsuccessful attempts at creating momentum. But our focus will always be on improving your writing; our exercises in class and our homework each night are designed for you to get the most from each day’s lesson. Crucial to your development as a writer will be our critiques of one another. Email 10 pages of a short story, novel, or memoir by May 30th to tdstorm@wisc.edu. You’ll be reading each other’s manuscripts and commenting on the movement of the narrative. We will not do line editing.
Syllabus

Thrill Me: Creating the Momentum That Publishers Crave

At the end of the day it's simple: what publishers and agents want is writing they can't set down. This goes for memoirs and character-driven literary stories as much as it goes for thrillers and spy novels. If you want to avoid rejection letters that claim your piece was “not compelling enough,” or “just didn’t grab me,” you need to get the proverbial ball rolling and then keep it rolling. This course will examine various techniques to achieve maximum momentum in your writing. Suspense, surprise, tension; mystery, anticipation, high stakes—we’ll sort out these various methods of moving your piece forward and we’ll also examine stuff that might stall your narrative, like background and flashback and set-up. How do you get all that crucial information into a story without killing the momentum? Come find out.

Monday: Making Readers Care

Think of the most recent action film you’ve seen. The stakes were pretty high, right? Something like the end of the world? Most writers have heard the “What’s at stake?” mantra multiple times, but if the goal is to “up the ante,” to continually raise the stakes, shouldn’t all stories be about the apocalypse? And if so, why have we sometimes been bored by tales of zombie epidemics and/or narrowly-averted nuclear disasters? Why do we sometimes leave blockbuster films thinking that despite all the mortal combat, despite all the nefarious conspiracies to destroy everything that’s good, nothing actually happened? On this first day of the week, we’ll examine the writer’s holy grail: reader investment.

Our driving questions:
• What motivates readers (publishers and agents especially) to read our work?
• What, besides death, constitutes high stakes?
• How do we raise the stakes?
• What strategies can we use to up the tension on every page?

We’ll look at the essential building blocks of storytelling and map out the relationship between all of our concepts for the week: character motivation, stakes, tension, surprise, suspense, hooks, and pacing. The emphasis for this course will be on how to apply our daily concepts to your writing; as such, our first homework assignment will be for you to map out your main plot according to our model and to assess how one of your classmates’ submitted pages are succeeding in delivering a compelling story.
Tuesday: Moving toward Point B: Progression and Momentum

I’ve heard many agents say that books need to be more like movies. As we all know, though, movies are never as good as books. So, what gives?

It’s often true that we need more action in our writing, but we need the right kind. Action should move a character from point A to point B.

The same goes for inaction—things like exposition, interior monologue, and flashbacks. There’s nothing inherently bad about that stuff; in fact, the various forms of inaction are precisely what makes books better than movies. But inaction needs to forward the momentum.

Our driving questions for today:
• What kinds of action work toward progression of the story?
• What kinds hinder momentum?
• How can we get the past (back story, flashback) moving our story forward rather than backward?
• What kinds of inaction should we avoid?
• Why are there so many ways to screw up?

We’ll examine several instances of effective and ineffective progression so that you’ll know exactly what to strive for—both with your action and with your inaction. Though our workshopping will focus on the manuscript you email ahead of time, be sure to come with more work (additional chapters or stories, troublesome scenes, etc.) so that you can be prepared for tonight’s homework, which is to troubleshoot the momentum of one of your scenes. Find a scene or beat in your writing that’s flagging, not moving your character toward point B. Then tackle a revision that applies our lessons from today so that you can revive that scene.

Wednesday: Continuous Hooking

You know how to write an engaging first sentence of a story. Everyone does. There are all sorts of ways to draw readers in. But what publishers want is a story that delivers on that initial intrigue and promise. And they want to keep seeing hooks throughout your writing, at the beginnings and ends of chapters, scenes, pages, and paragraphs.

Why not discuss hooks on Day One? Because they’re useless if not wedded to the stakes of your story. The concept of the hook, for our purposes, extends beyond your opening line. It’s about crafting a sentence that serves both the micro and macro levels of your narrative. And that’s not something everyone knows how to do.

Our driving questions:
• How do we hook readers?
• What challenges do we face in balancing hooks with the rest of the story?
• How do we incorporate hooks at various points throughout our writing?

The goal for today is to get you thinking about hooks in a new way. This is an art that, if you master it, will apply to every sentence of your manuscript. The ideal hook is two pronged: it hooks the reader, and it also latches into the meat of your story. We’ll look at the three musts of hooks and the four most common pitfalls.

Tonight’s homework will be to tackle another small rewrite of a scene or beat. I’ll urge you to either “stretch the tension” or “bridge conflict,” two concepts that will be made clear in today’s class. Come with approximately three pages to share for tomorrow.

Thursday: Set up and Pay off

Your characters are deep in the Amazonian rain forest on an excursion to find their lost colleague, who’s been studying the indigenous Huaorani tribe of Ecuador. During a conversation on a boat, one of the characters confesses he can’t swim. Are you obligated to dunk him in the water at some point? Is that too predictable? If you get him into such trouble, is your set-up too obvious?

These are the sorts of issues we need to consider while plotting our stories. As Howard Mittelmark and Sandra Newman, authors of *How Not to Write a Novel*, point out, your job is harder than God’s: “God can work with the most mind-bending coincidences, far-fetched plot devices, and perverse dramatic ironies... You do not have that luxury.” Today, we’ll look at the four most damaging errors in set-up/pay-off construction.

Our driving questions:
• What are the imperatives of set-up and pay-off.
• What sorts of scenarios irk publishers and agents?
• How should we best deal with plot twists and coincidence?
• How can foreshadowing add tension?

Set up and pay off is long-range stuff. It requires you to know your end points. But, of course, as we’re drafting and revising, we don’t always know where things will end up. We’ll discuss how to look for and keep track of your loose threads so that you can tie them together in your final revisions. As always, our focus will be on a thorough and thoughtful examination of your own work, so come with anything extra you’d like to troubleshoot. Tonight’s homework will be one of two options. For those who have some long-range stuff to work with, chart your setup and payoff following the example in class and then list ideas for setting up your “point B” scene(s). Write a setup scene that is imbued with its own tension points. For those who don’t have as much long-range work already written, apply the week’s lessons to another scene of yours. Is there any place where momentum seems to lag? Any scene that needs stretching tension? Anywhere you need to tweak the inaction elements? Revise.
Friday: Keeping the Pace

“Narrative pacing is the novelist’s biggest challenge,” says Don Maass. And Noah Lukeman claims, “Pacing and progression are the most cumulative, far-reaching elements of writing.” Both Lukeman and Maass are New York literary agents who deal with a wide range of fiction writers—both genre and non-genre—and who know that if you want a manuscript ready for publication, a thorough examination of your pacing will be crucial in your final revisions. We’ll explore some tips for diagnosing problems in pacing and how to fix them.

Our driving questions:
• How does pacing differ from progression?
• What can we do to accelerate too-slow pacing?
• When should we slow things down?
• How do we juggle plot and subplot?

Pacing is another long-range issue—one that often requires you to have helpful readers—but we’ll give you five clear strategies for altering your pacing (slowing it down or speeding it up as needed). By week’s end, you’ll know how to draw readers in and you’ll leave inspired to work on your manuscripts and get them ready to be read by a publisher.

Tim Storm received his MFA from Pacific University. His work was chosen by Pacific’s faculty as their sole fiction entry in the 2011 AWP Intro Journals Project, and he’s the winner of the 2013 Reynolds Price Short Fiction Award. He has taught literature and writing for the past 14 years.

Credit Option: Participants earn 1 credit by attending class and completing the assigned work for the week: daily reading, writing at least five pages of original work, and critiquing of one’s own and other’s work. To earn 2 credits, participants submit an additional five pages of work. Participants earn 3 credits by completing all of the above, and by submitting another additional five to 10 pages of creative work, or a short paper synthesizing how the material covered during the week applies to their own creative projects and/or teaching. All work must be handed in within two weeks of the final class date.