

Two Rules to Follow to Write Good Fiction

by Jonathan B. Williams



Today, I want to talk only about two of the many elements of good fiction writing that often get overlooked. These are: truth and the threat of death.

First, the truth. When I say truth, I don't mean grand, universal religious truths, though those are always welcome. Instead, I mean the small, everyday truths that a good writer notices and a bad writer misses. You see, as adults, we have all learned to lie, both to ourselves and to others. These aren't always great big lies, but mostly little white ones that help us keep our sanity intact and our social interactions smooth and pleasant. Good writing (and a good writer) strives constantly to break this habit and tell the truth, even if it hurts and even if it takes your writing where you don't want it to go.

Telling the truth also means avoiding easy clichés, looking at the world and telling exactly what you see, and never repeating a common sense platitude unless it is true. For instance, and beginning writers struggle with this the most, you may be tempted to try to impress your reader with broad generalizations or impress them with your vocabulary. Don't. Stick to the facts, especially the ugly ones, and tell your story, using only the words that best describe what you are trying to say. In fiction, telling the truth will help keep you from creating stock, flat characters (like those you see in most Hollywood blockbuster movies) and will allow you to make your characters' complex and nuanced without having to try. If a situation you write seems improbable or contrived but you hesitate to cut it because you need it to advance your plot, then cut it or change it and let your plot take a direction you hadn't considered, especially if that direction is more truthful. This is very hard to explain and I'm not going a good job, but telling the truth when you write is so essential that if you fail to do so you may as well not be writing.



Second, is the threat of death, which must always be hanging over the characters in any work of fiction. I don't necessarily mean a guy in a black cape concealing a knife or a gun, though that can certainly suffice. Instead, I mean that you can pen an eloquent novel, but if there is no threat or antagonizing force hanging over the characters and the situation, your novel will fall flat. I suspect this is the reason many freshman novels by otherwise gifted writers don't work: the skilled writer has forgotten to include an antagonist. In all works of fiction, there must be something lurking around the corner. It could be a person, a force, a situation, a setting, or an event; it doesn't really matter. But the threat is there, and your reader knows it because your characters, situation, and description all work together to remind them that it is there, waiting. This kind of threat (or antagonist if you prefer) is obvious in genres like horror, science fiction or thriller, but it is less obvious in the great American novel, where it is still just as necessary.

For example, in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, the main characters George and Lenny find themselves in a situation that is obviously precarious. As you may recall, they are labourers and their overseer is a very jealous man with a beautiful but overly flirtatious wife who shows herself off daily to the entire group of male labourers. She has trouble written all over her. At the same time, Lenny, poor simple Lenny, doesn't know his own strength and is ignorant of

the damage he could do. His friend and caretaker, George, does his best to keep Lenny out of trouble and seems to resent having to look after him, but caring for Lenny is the central purpose in George's life. Without Lenny, George would just be another migrant worker.



Disaster is looming around the corner, so we read on to find out how it will unfold. Again, this looming danger, this looming threat, is needed in every kind of fiction to move the action and plot forward. Without it, you are writing pointless conversations, full of clear descriptions and fancy words that go nowhere. When there is nothing at stake, there is no drama. It's as simple as that. So write your personal novel about your mother or your affair or your

time traveling around Europe after college, but don't forget to include the threat of death.

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Do you dream of writing a book but aren't sure about your writing ability? If so, maybe you should hire a ghostwriter. As a ghostwriter, I will help you tell your personal, professional, or creative story, and no one will ever know you got help. Please contact me at my website:

<http://www.jwghostwriter.com>

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