

Write Your Novel

Suspense

This is a useful resource I copied from a writing newsletter. Gillian McAllister looks at five ways to add tension to your novel.

Ask a question and don't answer it

I like to raise the question on the first page and answer it on the last. To me, this is what forms the structure of a novel, whether the question is 'what secret is this character keeping?' or 'how is this character going to resolve their tricky situation?' If you can figure out your novel's central question, you have figured out its *hook*. Then, do everything you can not to answer it until the closing pages, be that placing obstacles in the way of the solution or problems that make it worse.

Figure out what the worst possible thing to happen to your main character is

... and make it happen. This is basically how I plot. The concept comes first to me (in my novel *Everything But The Truth*, I discovered a very strange legal loophole that made me think *what if...*). The characters come next: a mistrustful heroine. And, of course, when somebody wonders whether they are simply incapable of trust, or imagining things, what's the worst thing that can happen to them? Have someone lie to them, of course. Repeatedly.

Foreshadowing

As I learnt during my edits, you need to use a light hand with foreshadowing. Too much of it gets frustrating, and can actually reduce the tension as it spoils the novel. But a dash here and there is perfect. Just enough to let your reader know that something bad is coming. And, indeed, it helps to let them know what sort of action to expect. If you don't foreshadow at all, action can come as a surprise and wrong-foot the reader, which is one reason why I might discard a book.

Create an impossible situation

The best novels I've read put the characters in a situation which is unsolvable. I recently watched *The Night Of* and the main character is accused of murder. The evidence against him is overwhelming, yet the audience is fairly sure he's innocent. That kind of situation makes for gripping viewing and reading. Of course, as the author, it's then your job to solve the impossible situation. But nobody said it was easy to be a writer...

Answer some questions along the way

There has to be give and take when reading a novel. It's not fair on the reader to ask one question and answer it at the end (contrary to what I say above) because they will have to read four hundred pages otherwise before getting any answers. I liken it to *Hansel and Gretel*. You need to breadcrumb the reader to the ending, leaving little clues and little pieces of information to keep them reading.