

KILLING THE PROTAGONIST

“A man who has nothing he would die for isn’t fit to live.”

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

If you can have your protagonist make the ultimate sacrifice, that’s great. But make sure they finish their story first. What I mean is, if you kill the character in the middle of their journey, it isn’t satisfying.

One of the most famous protagonist deaths is that of Janet Leigh in *Psycho*. I’ve heard much talk about how shocking that death was to people at the time, and how it was so groundbreaking. I’m sure it was, but Mr. Hitchcock and screenwriter Joseph Stefano still played by the rules. Janet Leigh’s character was done with her story.

In *Psycho*, Janet Leigh plays a woman, Marion Crane, who steals money from her boss. She skips town and winds up at the Bates Motel where she meets Norman. Norman makes them sandwiches that they eat in a back room of the motel. There they have this conversation about Norman’s situation with his “mother.”

MARION: Why don't you go away?

NORMAN: To a private island, like you?

MARION: No, not like me.

NORMAN: I couldn't do that. Who'd look after her? She'd be alone up there. The fire would go out. It'd be cold and damp like a grave. If you love someone, you don't do that to them even if you hate them. You understand that I don't hate her—I hate what she's become. I hate the illness.

MARION: Wouldn't it be better—if you put her—someplace—?

NORMAN: (Norman's demeanor darkens. He leans forward.) You mean an institution? A madhouse! People always call a madhouse 'someplace,' don't they. 'Put her in—someplace.'

MARION: I-I'm sorry. I didn't mean it to sound uncaring.

NORMAN: What do you know about caring. Have you ever seen the inside of one of those places? The laughing and the tears—and the cruel eyes studying you. My mother there! But she's harmless! Wh— she's as harmless as one of those stuffed birds!

MARION: I am sorry. I only felt—it seems she's hurting you. I meant well. (Marion is more than a little spooked by his personality transformation.)

NORMAN: People always mean well! They cluck

their thick tongues and shake their heads and suggest, oh so very delicately—! (He sits back.

The storm is over. Gently:) Of course, I've suggested it myself. But I hate to even think about it. She needs me. It—it's not as if she were a—a maniac—a raving thing. She just goes a little mad sometimes. We all go a little mad sometimes. Haven't you?

MARION: (her concern relaxed) Yes. Sometimes just one time can be enough. Thank you.

NORMAN: 'Thank you, Norman.'

MARION: Norman.

NORMAN: Oh, you're not—you're not going back to your room already?

MARION: I'm very tired. And I have a long drive tomorrow—all the way back to Phoenix.

NORMAN: Really?

MARION: I stepped into a private trap back there and I'd like to go back and try to pull myself out of it before it's too late for me to.

(She stands to go.)

At the end of this scene, Marion has decided to give back the money. She is better now, so although we may be shocked that she is killed, we do not feel cheated.

Thelma, in *Thelma and Louise*, takes on some of the traits of Louise and becomes a stronger person. Her thematic journey is over and it is okay if she dies. We may be sad, but again, we do not feel cheated.

Billy Wilder killed a few protagonists in his day. In *Sunset Boulevard*, Joe Gilles is killed off at the end, after he has made his transformation for the better. Few people have written a script as well constructed as *Sunset Boulevard*—with, of course, the exception of Wilder himself.

In *Ace in the Hole* (AKA *The Big Carnival*), Kirk Douglas plays a down-and-out reporter who finds a way to keep a man trapped in a cave in order to milk the story for as long as he can. He wants to be back on top again. He wants a Pulitzer Prize.

The reporter convinces others to go along with his plan, all for their own selfish reasons, including the engineer in charge of digging the man out. Eventually the man takes ill and it becomes clear he will die. This starts to change the reporter, he starts to feel guilty about what he's done, and now there is no time to get the man out.

The reporter ends up being stabbed in the belly (you'll have to see the film to see how). Instead of tending to his own wounds, he rushes to a church to get a priest to give the trapped man his last rites before he dies. He also confesses to what he's done, before he himself dies.

By not tending to his own wounds he sacrificed his own life so that the other man could have his last rites. We know that the reporter was a better human being when he died than he was at the story's start.

What about *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*? After all, they don't get better before they die. That is true they don't. But there is that fork in the road where they could go straight. They even try it, but it's not for them.

Before the escape to Bolivia, they are pursued by a super-posse that is almost supernatural. This could easily be seen as Death pursuing them. If they don't change their ways eventually, Death will catch up to them. They refuse to change with the times and choose to go out in a blaze of glory. As with the *Twilight Zone* episode mentioned before, it is important to see that there was another road that was not taken.

Chapter V

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TELL THE TRUTH

“We must never forget that art is not a form of propaganda, it is a form of truth.”

—John F. Kennedy

If you take nothing else away from this book, remember to always to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. If you do this always, you will be a master storyteller. This is much harder than it sounds.

What does it mean to tell the truth when writing fiction? For one thing, it is not about facts. Storytellers are not concerned with facts, just truth. Sometime facts can even get in the way of the truth.

When you are watching a horror movie and you know that that girl in the tank-top and panties shouldn't go in the basement alone, and you know she has other options, and she goes in the basement anyway—that's a lie. It only happened because the storytellers wanted it to happen, but not because it was a logical thing a reasonable person would do.

On the other hand, if the girl does everything you would do, and is even a little smarter, and the monster gets her anyway—now that's scary.

You want to see truth in fiction, watch Jimmy Stewart's breakdown in *It's a Wonderful Life* just before he decides to kill himself. It's about as real and truthful as anything you'll ever see on film. Capra is known for being light-hearted, but when he got dark, he always told the truth. If you want to affect people deeply, tell the truth.

Remember in *Big* when Tom Hanks has gotten his wish and becomes an adult? Remember his first night away from home in the sleazy hotel? He cried. This is a comedy, right? But when Hanks cries in that scene nobody's laughing. In fact, it's painful to watch. The filmmakers played the truth of the scene.

The Donner Party was a group of pioneers in the 1800s that got snowed in in the mountains and had to resort to cannibalism to survive. This is not light subject matter. Charlie Chaplin read about this incident and thought, *Now that's funny!*

The Donner Party inspired one of Chaplin's most famous scenes from one of his most famous films. In *The Gold Rush*, he plays a man trapped in a small cabin in the snow along with another unfortunate soul. They are starving. And even though some humor comes out of the situation, you never forget that these men are truly hungry.

With nothing left to eat, Chaplin cooks, and serves up, his leather shoe. Chaplin treats the shoe like a spaghetti dinner. He eats it like he's eating a fine meal. He makes the tragic funny. I'm not the first to say it, but the truth is funny.

Raiders of the Lost Ark has a great example of truth in it. There is a scene in which a scary opponent, who dazzles us with dangerous looking swordsmanship, confronts Indiana Jones. I remember sitting in the theater on the edge of my seat, expecting an exciting action sequence. But instead Indy calmly pulls out his gun and shoots the man dead. Anyone who saw that in the theater remembers the uproar of laughter that followed. Why was it so funny? It was the truth. It was the most logical thing for Indiana to do.

On the old *Batman* television show, the villains would always construct some Rube Goldberg-like contraption to kill Batman. Even little kids wondered why no one ever pulled out a gun and shot him. It was a lie and we all knew it.

Lying is visible ink. It is easy for the audience to see and, therefore, doesn't work.

Roseanne changed the face of television because she refused to lie on her show. She played the first "real" mother on television.

The film *Election* has some amazingly honest work in it. In one scene, a girl gives a speech at a school assembly that is so honest as to how most of us felt about high school that it seems like she's reading from your own diary.

In that same, film Mathew Brodrick has a scene where he is preparing for a sexual escapade by washing his genitals in the tub. Few of us would admit to doing such a thing

in public, but a theater full of people will howl with the laughter of recognition.

The film was raw with the honesty of human behavior.

Most writers are afraid to put something so personal down on paper. We think that it is a window into our own personal lives and we don't want to be judged by it. But here's the big secret—we are all the same. The more you dip into your own behavior, good or bad—the more others will see themselves, and you will fade into the background.

Several decades after World War II, color movie footage of Hitler was discovered. Some people thought that it shouldn't be shown because it humanized a monster. But that *is* what makes Hitler a monster—he was a human being. He's not some creature from outer space. It makes a much stronger point not to shy away from that fact. It means if we are not careful, we may produce another monster.

It is the same with a hero. If you can show that they had fears, doubts, and human foibles, but did a heroic thing anyway, it makes them all the more heroic.

The worst of us has good in him and the best of us has some bad. That is a truth that many of us want to deny, but as storytellers it is the truth we must illuminate.

The truth will always be sadder, happier, funnier, scarier and more profound than the best lie. More importantly, the audience never “sees” it, but it does feel it.

THE MASCULINE AND THE FEMININE

'The king died and then the queen died' is a story. 'The king died and then the queen died of grief' is a plot.

— E.M. Forster

The quote above is often used to define the difference between plot and story, but I'm not going to use it for that. I'm going to use it for what I call the “masculine” and “feminine” elements of story.

First, a little background. I was watching Shirley Maclaine on “The Actor's Studio” and she was asked what time of day she likes to write. She answered that if she was writing about the present, she liked to write by the masculine energy of the sun, and if she was writing about the distant past, she liked to write by the feminine energy of the moon.

The concept of seeing the moon as feminine and the sun as masculine seemed to make sense to me, in an ancient sort of way. And for some reason it stuck with me and I began to look at the two attributes in terms of story. Then I had, what was for me, an epiphany: There are masculine and feminine elements of story.

When I put this hypothesis to the test, and applied it to classic stories that have worked

over time, it held up. When I then applied it to my own work, it elevated the level of my stories. When I told friends and students, they also found that it helped them.

I define masculine elements as external, while feminine elements are internal. Without equal, or close to equal, parts, your story is unbalanced.

Consider the way most of us think of comic book stories—a square-jawed hero who is all good and never questions himself. Its concept of good and evil, right and wrong, is cartoonish. There is no gray, only black and white. Everything is on the surface. It is external. This is masculine.

Now consider the typical soap opera. It is all about evoking emotion. The outrageousness of the situation doesn't matter as long as it leads to a strong emotional response. It is all about what characters are experiencing inside. This is feminine.

There are action films, full of excitement, in which lots of things blow up and tons of people are killed, which men just love and which bore most women stiff because they are devoid of emotion.

Conversely, there are stories that bore men because they seem so slow and plodding—films that deal with the emotional lives of people but seem to have no story or forward movement.

Allow me to generalize here: Who buys pornography and who buys romance novels? One is all external and devoid of emotion and the other is largely internal and all about emotion. Both are unreal fantasy worlds. In movie-world vernacular they are “chick flicks” and “boy movies.”

Why is it that all of these forms—mindless action films, soap operas, comic books, pornography, and romance novels—are considered “trash” by most of us? Even those of us who indulge in them regard them as guilty pleasures. It is because they are unbalanced.

Understand that I’m not saying that one, feminine or masculine, is better or worse than the other. On the contrary, I am saying that one without the other is a lie. Again, our job as storytellers is to tell the truth. Your stories will have much more resonance if you do.

It is a lie to have a man mow down fifty people in a story with no consequences. There are consequences when people are murdered. There is an impact on the families of those killed, on the communities where they live, and more than likely on the killer.

Even in morally ambiguous worlds, such as those of *Goodfellas* or *The Godfather*, there are consequences for murder. The murderer becomes a target.

“He who lives by the sword shall die by the sword.” This is not simple moralizing or preaching. Even in headhunting societies, the reason that they shrink heads and sew up

the mouths and eyes of their victims is to keep the vengeful spirit within contained. Even in a culture where murder is condoned, they sense consequences.

This is why stories that ignore these consequences are considered unreal cartoons. They are hollow, with no real point.

I can't tell you how many screenplays by men I've read that have no emotional or thematic life whatsoever. They are all about plot. Lots of things happen, but without any real purpose.

I have also read many scripts by women where plot and action take a backseat to emotional matters.

This is where I'm sure many of you want to kill the messenger, but I have seen it over and over again. I'm sure other writing teachers will tell you the same thing. Please don't have a knee-jerk reaction to this concept. You may fall at either end of the spectrum, regardless of your sex. Remember, I am generalizing. But I have noticed it to be generally *true*. And it is my job to tell the truth.

More specifically, how do I define masculine and feminine traits?

Masculine traits are anything that moves the story forward externally. For example, Character A, a policeman, finds out that the murderer in the case he's investigating is

another cop. That is a masculine element.

The murdering cop is Character A's best friend and once risked his life to save Character A. This is a female element. It is the balance of these two elements that creates dramatic tension and keeps an audience interested. It keeps their brains working: What is Character A going to do? It creates depth.

Even in E.M. Forster's example of story and plot he uses the King to express the male and the Queen to express the female. It appears that Forster too recognized this on some level.

Remember The Donner Party? They were the group of snowbound pioneers who were forced to eat their dead to survive and that Chaplin had read about.

Saying that they ate their dead is a purely factual statement devoid of emotion. The following is the diary entry of one of the party members:

According to Mary Graves, as reported by Eliza Farnham in, published in 1856:

"The morning came, and still the flood fell. They roused themselves to move on a little, if it were possible, despite the storm; but they had lost their course, and the sun no longer befriended them. It was proposed to return to the cabins, following their own tracks, but the Indians would not consent, and Miss G. resolutely determined to follow them. There was nothing possible, there, but starvation. The fate before them could not be worse, and might be better. Miss G.'s resolution

encouraged her companions. They went on all day without a morsel of food, the rain pouring continuously. At night it ceased. Some were confused in their perceptions, some delirious, some raving. Those who were strong enough to realize their condition, might well now despair. The women bore up better than the men. One of them had a cape or mantle stuffed with raw cotton, and upon a minute examination of it, she found, between the shoulders, about an inch square of the inner ****surface** dry. The lining was cut, and enough taken out to catch the spark from the flint. They lost or left their axe, but were able to make a fire, after much difficulty, of a few gathered boughs. They sat down around it. There was nothing else to be done.”

Thornton wrote that “the painful journey was again continued, and after traveling two or three miles, the wind changed to the south-west. The snow beginning to fall, they all sat down to hold a council for the purpose of determining whether to proceed. All the men but Mr. Eddy refused to go forward. The women and Mr. Eddy ****de**-clared they would go through or perish. Many reasons were urged for returning, and among others the fact that they had not tasted food for two days, and this after having been on an allowance of one ounce per meal. It was said that they must all perish for want of food. At length, Patrick Dolan proposed that they should cast lots to see who should die, to furnish food for those who survived.

See how including emotional details gives the incident so much more impact than just the external facts? It creates dramatic tension.

As I said before, one cannot draw a line and say that all male writers write this way and

that all female writers write the other way. But since discovering this concept, I have made certain observations about what kinds of people cross the line.

Actors, visual artists, poets, playwrights, English and literature majors tend to fall more on the feminine side of things, regardless of their gender. These people tend to put a lot more emphasis on character, the beauty of words, scenery, mood, and theme. Plot is seen by many of these people as cheap.

Films and books that are more feminine usually do better among critics and intellectuals, but seldom bring in a wide audience. They are often called “character driven.” Critics will often believe that these stories are too “smart” for the masses. Too cerebral, they might say.

Video gamers, mainstream comic book readers or creators, and action film fans tend to fall in the masculine category. Again, this is regardless of gender.

Stories with an emphasis on the visceral tend to do better with audiences. This is why the summer film releases are big budget special effects extravaganzas. People have fun going to films like this, but don’t expect to get caught up emotionally in the content—and seldom are they. Other than an “Ooh,” an “Ahh,” or a “Wow—that blowed up real good!”

I like to see a good explosion as much as the next guy, but I want to care about what or

who is blowing up. In *Jaws*, the shark is blown up at the end, but it matters storywise and its one explosion has more impact than ten explosions in other films. Storytellers often feel that you either have one kind of story or another, but it is the balance that gets you the best of both worlds—a fun story to watch or read that has resonance for the audience. If you aren't trying to speak to an audience why bother to write it down?

This is not about writing *down* to members of your audience. This is about writing *for* them. It is not their job to understand you; it is your job to communicate with them. And if you use drama to find an emotional way to give them an intellectual idea, they will “get it.” They may not be able to articulate the idea, but they will *understand* it on a level beyond articulation.

Actors often talk about giving characters vulnerability. I think this is just another way of talking about the internal, emotional life of a character. Without this quality, characters are caricatures, not fully realized human beings.

The character of Quint in *Jaws* is a virtual cartoon of a salty old sailor until he delivers a speech about a terrifying experience he had with a shark attack. At that moment, a character who had shown nothing but a crusty exterior opens up and becomes human. This combination of masculine and feminine traits tells the truth about being a human being. One without the other is a lie and we know it. We feel it.

You have more than likely heard conflict broken down this way:

Man against Man;

Man against Nature;

Man against Himself.

I have seen *Jaws* described as *Man against Nature*. Is it? I think that is only a masculine view of the story's conflict. You could accurately describe the *Jaws* rip-offs as Man against Nature, as they had no characters of change—no armature. But *Jaws* has a solid armature. *Jaws* is about a man facing his fear and conquering it. I would say that is *Man against Himself*.

Moby Dick has also been described by some as *Man against Nature*. This description totally ignores Captain Ahab's obsession with the white whale and how that obsession eventually kills him. The whale is only an external manifestation of Ahab's internal conflict.

There is no reason that the other two masculine conflicts listed above can't include Man against Himself. In fact, to be full, they should. Otherwise, what's the point?

Things that affect a character physically are masculine and are visible ink. How he feels about them is feminine and invisible. If you can strike a balance between these two elements, your story stands a better chance of resonating with audiences.

Remember the masculine conflict only forces the hero to deal with his feminine conflict. It is the external pressure that makes a diamond of a lump of coal.

Look for ways to balance the masculine and feminine elements in your stories. More than likely, you will be drawn toward one over the other. Be careful of this; it will not serve you well to give into the things you already do well. If you go through the ritual pain of doing the very thing you don't want to do, you will become a better writer. You will ascend.

Just as the letter "Y" can sometimes be a vowel, there can sometimes be a feminine element. In George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, the theme is the feminine element.

That story is a case where the characters must be stereotypes to represent the different strata of society. All components are there to illustrate the armature idea.

Writer Rod Serling used this kind of storytelling to great effect in his work on the classic *Twilight Zone* television series.

In the 1960s and 70s, we learned a valuable lesson—that we should treat all people the same, regardless of race. But somewhere along the way we decided that what that meant was that we weren't to even notice, or acknowledge, a person's race.

As a black man, friends have sometimes told me that they never even noticed that I was black. We all know this is a lie. What they mean to say is that it doesn't matter to them

that I'm black.

It is not a crime against society to notice that someone is different than you. The crime is to judge them for it.

The differences between men and women have been used to keep women down. So, we as a society have tried to fix things by pretending that we were all the same. All the while being frustrated by the opposite sex and whispering in shadows with our friends that we just can't understand how men/women think.

Male brains and female brains are as different from one another as a ton of bricks is from a ton of feathers—equal but not the same.

I knew going into the idea of masculine and feminine traits was going to get me into trouble with some of you, so I did a little research on the subject.

I learned that the amount of testosterone we receive in the womb at a critical point in our development determines the “maleness” or “femaleness” of our brains. And that there are real physiological differences in the way our brains function.

For instance, from the earliest ages, girls are more interested in interpersonal relationships than boys. Shortly after birth, girl babies show an interest in voices and faces, whereas boy babies show an interest in inanimate objects.

Throughout the animal kingdom testosterone makes males more aggressive and competitive while female hormones decrease these traits.

Some of the traits enhanced by the testosterone-formed male brain are:

a desire for status and power;

an interest in how things work;

an interest in acquiring facts and data;

an emphasis on logic;

an interest in problem solving;

more aggressive than females;

more competitive than females;

a more heightened sex drive than in females.

It is easy to see why most men are drawn to a particular type of story given the inner workings of their brains.

Female brains received less testosterone in the womb. Some of the traits enhanced in the female brain are:

an interest in people;

an interest in intimacy;

an emphasis on interpersonal relationships;

an interest in bonding with others;

an interest in the feelings of others;

a greater ability to empathize.

Here, too, it is clearly seen why women are more often drawn to certain types of stories.

The corpus callosum is the link between the right and left hemispheres of the brain. In women, this connector is thicker, making it easier for women to exchange information between the two hemispheres.

Women store their emotions in both hemispheres while men keep their emotions only in the right hemisphere, making them more difficult to access. This explains why it is often said that men are not in touch with their emotions. They literally aren't. At least they are not as in touch as are women.

One study showed, when asked to identify the expressions on faces, women used very little of their brain to perform the task, whereas men used much more of their brain and had much more difficulty than women performing the task.

Not only are women more in touch with their own emotions than men, but they are more in touch with the feelings of others. Women are physiologically more equipped to empathize with others.

Whether you believe that these brain differences are a result of intelligent design or evolution, there must be a reason that each gender has a specialty. We must need both ways of seeing the world in order to survive in it.

Since I have been thinking about the masculine and feminine components of story construction, I've listened closely to the ways men and women talk about the films and books they enjoy. I was recently discussing a film with a friend of mine. She liked the film. I did not. What she said in the film's defense was that it had to be good because it made her cry four times. A response I often hear from women.

I know another woman who will always say, "How could you not like that film—it's so romantic!" Or she will say, "But it was so beautiful."

On the other end of the spectrum, many of my male friends gush over martial arts films or special effects extravaganzas devoid of any emotional content, but full of action or killing. When you look at the make up of our brains, these responses seem to make more sense.

Consider a film such as *Casablanca*, which balances both feminine and masculine components very well. A very romantic film, but I know just as many men as women who respond to the film. It has a solid plot that ties in closely with the humanistic elements of the story. Achieving this balance gives stories a resonance that helps one

reach a broader audience.

It's a Wonderful Life has some of the most romantic scenes I have seen in any film. It also deals with George Bailey's inner emotional life of depression and disappointment. It also has a strong plot. That balance crosses gender and time. Virtually every classic has close to equal parts of male and female elements.

The Omaha Beach sequence of *Saving Private Ryan* was hailed by both audiences and critics as being one of the most realistic war depictions in the history of film. Was it the great special effects that made it so? I don't believe so. The sequence contained both masculine and feminine elements.

When the sequence opens, Tom Hanks is having tremors, an external indication of his inner emotional condition. Other men on the Higgins boats begin to vomit from seasickness and nervous tension.

Before one shot is fired we are already an uneasy audience. There is a sense of dread.

When the boats hit the beach, the men are riddled with bullets. How many times have we seen people being killed on film? Why is it that these deaths seemed to affect us more than most? It's because we had sense of how these men felt before they died—their abject terror.

I know men who are usually energized by depictions of violence on screen, but who were mortified by these scenes of death.

In one shot, a soldier wanders back and forth in the mayhem, looking for his missing arm.

In another, a man with his insides exposed cries out for his mother as he lay dying.

Although full of action, this is no action film.

This film is “realistic” because it is honest about the emotional impact of violence as well as the physical. I have seen actual footage of D-Day with men falling down dead and it seems less real than in *Ryan*. Why? It’s because it isn’t a complete picture.

Seeing a man fall over dead without knowing anything about him has less impact. *Saving Private Ryan* gives one a sense of what it might have felt like to be there.

Here’s a good way to think of it: If a good friend of yours says to you, “There was a really bad car accident on the freeway yesterday,” you might have some interest. On the other hand, if she says, “*I* was in a really bad car accident yesterday,” your interest is much greater.

The first statement is all masculine; the second contains both *male* and *female* components. It involves emotion because you care about the person in the story.

I don’t like everything about James Cameron’s *Titanic*, but he does in that film exactly what I did with the car wreck example. At the beginning of the film (in present day) he

has a man explain, in all male terms, what happened to the ship after it hit the iceberg and how it sank. Later in the film we see characters we know going through the experience. We get a sense of what it might have felt like to be on that sinking ship.

Remember that the *facts* are not necessarily the *truth*. The cold fact that the *Titanic* sank says little about the truth of the experience.

You don't have to take my word for this idea of masculine and feminine story elements. Listen to how people talk about stories they read, watch, and write. They will more than likely fall in one camp or the other and downplay the importance of the opposite element. They will be all-plot-and-action or all-character-and-mood. This division will probably fall along gender lines. It's just the way our brains work.

DRAMA IN REAL LIFE

In 1968, sparked by the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., an elementary school teacher from the all-white town of Riceville, Iowa, tried an exercise to teach her young students about prejudice. The exercise became an annual event.

She first asked the kids what it meant to be prejudiced. They all knew what it meant, and that it was bad.

Then she told them that those of them with brown eyes were better than those with blue eyes. Using the tried-and-true stereotypes of racism, she said that blue-eyed people were lazy and stupid.

For the entire school day the blue-eyed kids were to be shunned. They were not to be played with or spoken to. They could not use the drinking fountain and were not allowed to use the playground equipment at recess.

In contrast, the brown-eyed kids were given second helpings at lunch and an extra five minutes of playtime at recess. They were, in every way, treated better than the blue-eyed kids.

Needless to say, the blue-eyed kids had an awful day. Their brown-eyed classmates made life hell for them. They resorted to name-calling and teasing of those who were, just the day before, their friends.

The next day, the teacher told the children that she had lied about brown-eyed people being better, and that the reverse was true.

The blue-eyed children, now believing they were superior, behaved as their brown-eyed counterparts had the day before.

At the end of the second day she told her students why she had put them through this painful experience.

Now, when they were asked about prejudice, these children understood it, and the evils of it, intimately. These young people were transformed forever. When interviewed about the experience as adults, they say it was life changing. They also say it was worth the pain they went through.

The teacher had told them about how bad prejudice is, but apparently the telling lesson did not take. You can see how showing rather than telling is what transformed these children through ritual pain.

Remember, drama is a way of getting across an intellectual idea emotionally. That is

exactly what happened here.

When film of the elementary school teacher's exercise is shown to adults, they learn all of the lessons the kids did, but without having to go through the experience themselves.

This is what makes drama so powerful—it is a way for people to experience things without actually experiencing them.

Your responsibility as a storyteller is to be a good teacher, not a good preacher. If you only talk about what you want to say, you are only proselytizing. But if you show your audience through demonstration, it will learn, seemingly, on its own. Not only that, but its members will learn it more thoroughly.

This is why here, in this book, I use so many stories to make my points. I want you to make the observations yourself, with my guidance.

There is more to this remarkable story, by the way. The teacher, Jane Elliot, suffered greatly for her actions. She was called a “nigger-lover” and received death threats from angry parents and townspeople. Her own children became the targets of violence perpetrated by other kids.

Through all of this, she kept doing what she thought was right. She kept right on doing her exercise.

She made personal sacrifices for the greater good. This is the definition of a hero in life as well as drama.

Every element of drama has its real-life counterpart. Try to notice the invisible ink in life as well as fiction.

THE MYTH OF GENRE

Genre is visible. People know if they are watching a western or science fiction. But invisible ink is about the inner workings of story, not the costumes the characters wear. Among the people who know me, I am known as the guy who doesn't like any film that comes out. This isn't true. It's mostly true. Anyway, they rack their brains trying to figure out what it is I *do* like and why. They think it might be subject matter or a certain kind of tone or maybe a particular genre. But there is always some wild card film that blows their theory.

Among people I work with, I am known as a person who can go easily from writing one genre to another. They can't figure out how I do it. It's simple. I just try to tell a story and tell it well. That is the same thing I want from other storytellers as well.

I believe that thinking of stories in genre terms only makes one think of how stories are different from one another instead of what they all have in common. Good drama doesn't understand the boundaries of genre. It doesn't care if someone rides a horse, a car, or a space ship, as long as you care about the rider.

Genre is concerned with the external. Some stories have been told in completely different genres with only cosmetic changes. Akira Kurosawa's *Hidden Fortress*, a

samurai movie, became the basis for the first *Star Wars* film. Another Kurosawa film, *Seven Samurai*, became a western.

Kurosawa himself took William Shakespeare's *King Lear* and set it in feudal Japan. Patrick Stewart took that same story and set it in nineteenth-century Texas for his television production, *King of Texas*.

The classic musical *Westside Story* is *Romeo and Juliet* updated and set in the world of rival street gangs in 1950s New York.

The John Wayne western *Red River* is a retelling of the classic sea epic *Mutiny on the Bounty*. Same story, different genre.

Genre is irrelevant to the dramatist. A dramatist should only be concerned with drama. If one genre can help you tell your story better than another, use it. No genre is better or worse than another.

If you think about it, *Jaws* is just a monster movie. And, like a lot of monster movies, incidental characters are picked off as our hero tries to stop the creature. But, somehow, the film transcends genre. It's because it has an armature and a character of change. Lots of films came out after *Jaws* which tried to repeat its success by emulating its masculine elements. One film used an orca whale in place of a shark, and another used a mutated bear.

None of these films went below the surface to understand why *Jaws* had resonance.

Terminator and *Aliens* are also just monster movies on the outside; what sets them apart are their strong armatures.

This happens in literature as well. No one ever says that *1984* is just a science fiction novel. Or that *Animal Farm* is a kid's book because it has talking animals. Nor do they say the same of *Gulliver's Travels* because its world is fantastic.

Is *Star Wars* sci-fi or is it fantasy or is it action? If it is sci-fi, does it have anything in common with *Alien*? What do *E.T.* and *2001* have in common? What are the similarities between *Terminator 2* and *Galaxy Quest*? Indeed there is little these films share in common.

We have also prescribed a hierarchy to genre stories: "This is a costume drama; it must have more to say than a sci-fi story." This, of course, is not the truth.

When Clint Eastwood made UNFORGIVEN, it felt like few westerns before it because it was more concerned with theme than with props, setting, costumes and stereotypes. It transcended genre.

Fed-up with the restrictions enforced on him by networks and advertisers, Rod Serling

stopped writing the prestigious teleplays for live television for which he was famous.

When he announced that he would be doing a fantasy show, many thought he had given up on doing “serious work” for television.

Mr. Serling knew something the executives didn't. “I knew I could have Martians say things that Democrats and Republicans couldn't,” he said. He was able to use the prejudice of genre hierarchy to his advantage. He wrote fantastical stories about real human issues without any flack from advertisers, and audiences always knew what he was saying.

We all have a fondness for a particular motif. I like the clothes and cars from the mid-twentieth century. I have a visceral response to those things when I see them in movies. That doesn't make the film good.

More importantly, other people may not share my appreciation for these things, so as a storyteller, I must speak to them on a deeper level. The armature must be so strong that it makes the story universal and makes the genre inconsequential.

As a storyteller, you should be aware in which genre your story will, more than likely, be viewed. Outwardly, it should be in a recognized genre.

That will make it much easier to sell and to market. Only you need to know you've transcended the genre. Your audience will know it too, they just won't know they know.

Related to this topic is the idea that one medium is superior to another—live theater is more artistic than cinema— or that novels are inherently better than comic books. Or movies are better than television.

These are all just mediums that can be used to tell stories and that is all. Each has its own strengths and it is up to you to use the strengths of whichever medium you choose to help tell your story.

If you want to test this idea, read the graphic novels (comic books) *Maus* and *Maus II*, by Art Spiegelman. It was the first comic book ever to win a Pulitzer Prize. A special category had to be created so that the book qualified.

Will Eisner's graphic novels are also worth your time. I'm sure that if he told stories in another medium, everyone would know his name. In fact, the top award in comics bears his name. He has won several, by the way.

Early in the days of movies they were thought to have no importance, a cheap dirty little entertainment. Most "legitimate" actors avoided the "flickers" all together. But there were a few pioneers who saw the power of the medium and learned to use it to tell stories.

D.W. Griffith was the first filmmaker to use crosscutting; that is, cutting between one scene and another to build tension. When other's voiced their concerns, saying that it

might confuse the audience, he said, "If Dickens can do it so can I."

Don't let your medium or your genre stop you from telling a good story.

CLIMAX

One of my students once asked me, “What about climax?” At first, I didn’t understand the question. What about climax? I thought it was pretty self-explanatory. It’s the one thing everyone knows about story structure, that at the end, there’s a climax. But I thought about it more and realized: A climax is the bringing together of the masculine and feminine elements that shows the character’s change, or lack thereof. We can see how much a character has changed based on how they respond when the pressure is on.

At the climax of *E.T.*, the government guys are after the alien, and Elliot helps him go home. Elliot does this even though it hurts him.

Going back to sacrifice, one of the things sacrifice does is allow audience members to see the sincerity of a character’s change. It gives them a yardstick by which to measure growth.

In *Tootsie*, Dustin Hoffman could continue lying about being a woman, but at the climax he has grown enough to tell the truth. At the climax, he reveals himself to be a man on live television. He does this despite the possibility of a lawsuit by his employers and the alienation of the woman he has fallen in love with. But he is an honest man, now, and we see it through his extreme actions.

In *Casablanca*, Bogart does precisely what he said he wouldn't do and he "sticks his neck out" for others by killing a man and giving up the woman he loves. Nothing forces him to do this except his own growth.

In *Jaws*, the climax occurs when the protagonist is alone on a sinking boat as the shark makes its way toward him. But he has the courage to do what he does. His fear is gone.

The climax of the *Twilight Zone*, mentioned earlier, is when the man having the birthday challenges the others to kill the kid with the powers. He makes a sacrifice, but since the others don't respond to his call, it is for nothing. But we can measure their lack of change by their inaction.

The climax of the play *A Doll's House* is Nora's change. She stands up to her husband in a way she never would have at the beginning of the play.

Simply put, the climax of a story puts the protagonist in an intense situation that forces a choice that shows growth or lack of growth.

This is only true of stories that transcend genre and have a solid armature.

GOD FROM THE MACHINE

You may have noticed in a cartoon or two that, often, when Bugs Bunny is in trouble, he reaches into a pocket and pulls out exactly what he needs. Not only does he have what he needs, but he doesn't even have a pocket until he needs one. This is called *deus ex machina*. It translates to "God from the machine."

Ancient Greek playwrights would sometimes put a hero into a sticky situation, only to have him saved at the end by one of the Gods. The "God" would be lowered down to the stage, suspended by ropes or some such contraption or *machine*. This is where we get "God from the machine."

Guess what? Audiences got tired of this trick very fast. It's not very satisfying to have your hero not save himself. It's a cheat and it's lazy. It is a form of dishonesty and your job is to tell the truth, *remember?*

Sure, it works when Bugs Bunny does it, because it is so ridiculous it's funny. But most of the time, even in comedy, it is better to let your hero solve the problem—no invisible pockets.

On the other hand, if you want to spring on the audience a new problem, feel free. This

works well because it only gets your character deeper into trouble. Trouble is good, because trouble is conflict, and conflict is ritual pain.

SUPPORTING PLOTS (SUBPLOTS)

I don't like the term subplot; I think it confuses people. What happens is that storytellers try to include "subplots" to flesh out their world and make it feel full. This is never a reason to introduce a character or *subordinate (sub)* plot.

I like to call them "supporting plots." They are there to support the main plot. Everything should hang off the same armature.

Often, the story of the protagonist's clone will be seen as a subplot, but it only exists to help make your point—like the other "stalkers" in *There's Something About Mary*. Those are supporting plots.

The other womanizers in *TOOTSIE* only exist to put pressure on Hoffman's character to see himself in another light and change. How is that subordinate to the main plot? It isn't.

What about the man who honestly falls in love with Hoffman as a woman? It shows Hoffman how his lies can hurt people deeply.

There is nothing subordinate about these plots. I think that if you think of them as

supporting plots, it will lead you down a path that supports what you are trying to say.

Your world will, indeed, be fleshed out, but with things that matter.

Few can see the impact of supporting plots on the armature idea; but there they are, invisibly making stories more resonant.

SLAVE, NOT MASTER

I often have spoken to writers who say the reason they like writing is that they have so much power. If you want it to snow, you can make it snow. Or if you want to make it sunny, you can make it sunny. You can do whatever you want. You are a master of the universe. Guess what—that is not so. You are a slave to your story, not a master.

Once you figure out your armature, characters, places, scenes, and sequences are built around the armature.

In *Raising Arizona*, when the convict escapes from prison, it is raining. Why is this? It is because that scene has to resemble a birth as much as possible. The mud dripping down the convict's face as he emerges from the hole, screaming, helps complete the image of a grotesque birth. The rain provides the mud, of course, but there is also thunder and lightning. There is a storm, which further signifies something is wrong.

Think of it more as making *discoveries* rather than *decisions*. You will then find yourself looking for things that illustrate your point. If you do this, your work will be stronger and more focused. It will elevate your work over most.

I know some storytellers who think they can buck the system. They want to bend the

rules of story around what they want to do. It doesn't work. But they never seem to understand why people don't like their work. It's a pretty simple rule — if you write without a destination, it's a sure bet that you'll never get there.

Chapter VI

DIALOGUE

SOUNDING NATURAL

ADDRESS AND DISMISS

ADDRESS AND EXPLAIN

DIALOGUE

My barber wants to make a film. He wants to write a screenplay, so he wants to know the format. He figures that once he knows the format, he's set. There is nothing else to know, right? As he said to me, "I already know what I want people to say."

Most people are under the impression that scriptwriting is coming up with dialogue. Most critics seem to think this as well. They will go on and on about dialogue, but they know nothing about drama, or how it is structured.

I feel like dialogue is talked, and written about, way too much. It is the writing that people can see, so they focus on it. Of course, you know, now, how much more there is to story construction. But I suppose I must write a little about dialogue.

Remember that invisible ink is the writing below the surface of the words. This invisible ink keeps the audience's brains active. Subtext is a kind of invisible ink. The dialogue exchange that follows is something I heard at a friend's house, over a Christmas breakfast, between a mother and her grown daughter.

Mother: You sound hoarse.

Daughter: Yeah, I had a cold. It's

going away, now.

Mother: You should take care of that.

How long have you had it?

Daughter: I'm fine. It hung on for a while. I'm fine.

Mother: It's going away? You taking anything for it?

Daughter: I'm okay.

There is nothing unusual about this conversation. But here's the thing: The daughter's husband had recently died of AIDS. The daughter also had AIDS, but was not yet showing any signs of the disease. Read the exchange again with that in mind. That's subtext. That's invisible ink. Lots is being said, but not spoken.

Subtext is all in the set-up. Once you establish that two characters hate each other, for instance, all you need to do is put them in the same room together and have them talk about the weather—the audience will do most of your work for you.

Dialogue is a tool, and just like any tool, you use it when you need it. It can be used to define your armature, give essential plot information, or reveal character. If it isn't doing that it isn't doing anything.

The following scene is from *Some Like it Hot*. In this scene, we meet the two main characters. They are musicians who play in a speakeasy during Prohibition.

"SOME LIKE IT HOT"

Screenplay by
Billy Wilder and I.A.L. Diamond
1958

The girls have gone into a tap-dance. The captain of the chorus looks toward the bandstand, grins and winks at -- JOE, the saxophone player. He winks back. JERRY, who is thumping the bass-fiddle behind him, leans forward and taps Joe on the shoulder.

JERRY

Say, Joe - tonight's the night, isn't it?

JOE

(eye on tap-dancer)

I'll say.

JERRY

I mean, we get paid tonight, don't we?

JOE

Yeah. Why?

He takes the mouthpiece out of his saxophone,
wets the reed.

JERRY

Because I lost a filling in my back tooth.
I gotta go to the dentist tomorrow.

JOE

Dentist? We been out of work for four months -
and you want to blow your first week's pay on
your teeth?

JERRY

It's just a little inlay - it doesn't even have
to be gold -

JOE

How can you be so selfish? We owe back rent -
we're in for eighty-nine bucks to Moe's
Delicatessen - we're being sued by three Chinese
lawyers because our check bounced at the laundry
- we've borrowed money from every girl in the
line -

JERRY

You're right, Joe.

JOE

Of course I am.

This is called exposition. The scene gives us information about the financial status of

these men, as well as about their personalities.

Exposition is some of the hardest writing to do. Finding a natural way to have characters speak things they already know can seem impossible at times. It is easy to do it clumsily.

This *is* the kind of thing you *should* learn from observing the way others do it.

But here is a word of warning: Now that you know what to look for, many of these techniques will seem obvious to you; be careful not to dismiss something because you can now see it.

SOUNDING NATURAL

Over the last few years, I have noticed that every character I read, or see in the movies or on television, sounds like another movie or television show. Real people don't talk like movie people. Listen to how people speak. They didn't all grow up in your neighborhood, nor do they all have your educational background.

Because I've worked in both animation and comic books, I know a lot of illustrators. One of the things that I learned is that the good ones always do life-drawings. They learn to draw the human figure from looking at a human figure. Sounds obvious, huh? Well it's not. Many comic book artists learn from copying other artists. These people are never as good of draftsmen as their life-drawing counterparts. They will often hear the advice, "Draw from life." This is good advice for us all.

When you write dialogue, or anything else, think of yourself as a puppeteer. You are hiding under the table; you don't want anyone to be thinking of you. You want their attention on the puppet. Once they are thinking of you, you've lost them.

This does not mean you can't have a character say witty, funny, smart, profound things, but it had better be the character talking, *not* you.

As a storyteller, your job is to get out of the way of the story. This isn't about you. It may be about what you have to say, but it isn't about *you*. Let go of your ego.

ADDRESS AND DISMISS

The first time I noticed this technique, I was watching John Carpenter's *The Thing*. In the film, an alien creature with the ability to assume any form terrorizes a group of men in an isolated research base.

In this particular scene, the alien has assumed the shape of one of the men, but then begins to distort. The neck stretches impossibly and tendons snap. The head detaches from the rest of the body as the other men watch in disbelief. The head, now upside down on the floor, sprouts spider's legs and grows two antennas with eyes on the ends. Even for this film, it was almost too much. They had reached the outer bounds of their reality. Just then one of the men says, "You gotta be fucking kidding."

This kind of dialogue can save you when you think you may lose your audience. Sometimes audience members need a representative within the narrative. It allows you to address and dismiss their concerns so that they can stay engrossed in the story.

A very famous "Address and Dismiss" is in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, when they are trying to escape the super-posse by jumping off a cliff into a river.

When Sundance admits he can't swim, Butch laughs and says, "Well, hell, the fall will

probably kill you!”

This example cuts the audience off at the pass, so to speak, before they can say, “Give me a break, there is no way they could make that jump!”

In *Tootsie*, we must believe that the other characters believe Dustin Hoffman is a woman.

There are many comments made by other characters about how unattractive Tootsie is.

This is an excellent use of “address and dismiss.”

All of these examples get laughs from the audience. I think it’s because it’s another kind of truth-telling. It’s a tricky tool because it could pull people out of the scene. It is a kind of wink to the audience that lets them know the storyteller knows that maybe she’s gone too far; but when used correctly, it is seamless—invisible.

ADDRESS AND EXPLAIN

This is related to “address and dismiss” but serves a different function. The best example is in the first *Star Wars*, when Luke Skywalker sees the Millennium Falcon for the first time. After it was revealed, a hush came over the audience as they took in the magnificent ship. Then Luke exclaims, “What a piece of junk!”

The crowd erupted with laughter, because that’s not at all what we were thinking.

This was George Lucas’ world and we knew nothing about it. There is no way we would have known that the ship was considered a piece of junk without that clever bit of dialogue.

One of the things that drives me crazy when people talk about “good dialogue” is that they never talk about how well it’s used, only how it stood out. Some of the best dialogue is quiet and subtle and reveals things about plot, theme, or character, with the precision of a surgeon. Sometimes that means it’s not quotable, but quotable dialogue is not the primary job of a storyteller.

Chapter VII

SUPERIOR POSITION

SHOW THEM ONCE SO THEY KNOW

SUPERIOR POSITION

There is a distinct difference between 'suspense' and 'surprise,' and yet many pictures continually confuse the two. I'll explain what I mean.

We are now having a very innocent little chat. Let's suppose that there is a bomb underneath this table between us. Nothing happens, and then all of a sudden, 'Boom!' There is an explosion. The public is surprised, but prior to this surprise, it has seen an absolutely ordinary scene, of no special consequence. Now, let us take a suspense situation. The bomb is underneath the table and the public knows it, probably because they have seen the anarchist place it there. The public is aware the bomb is going to explode at one o'clock and there is a clock in the decor. The public can see that it is a quarter to one. In these conditions, the same innocuous conversation becomes fascinating because the public is participating in the scene. The audience is longing to warn the characters on the screen: 'You shouldn't be talking about such trivial matters. There is a bomb beneath you and it is about to explode!'

In the first case we have given the public fifteen seconds of surprise at the moment of the explosion. In the second we have provided them with fifteen minutes of suspense. The conclusion is that whenever possible the public must be informed. Except when the surprise is a twist, that is, when the unexpected ending is, in itself, the highlight of the story.

—Alfred Hitchcock

Alfred Hitchcock's definition of superior position is about the best there is. It is when the audience knows something that the characters do not know. Most of the time it's used for suspense, but not always.

In Chuck Jones's hilarious animated cartoon *Feed the Kitty*, a huge bulldog adopts a sweet little kitten. The problem, or conflict, is that the woman of the house has forbidden the dog from bringing anything into the house, so he must keep his new pet a secret.

At one point in the film, the woman starts to make cookies, and unbeknownst to her, the kitten climbs into a bowl of batter set under an electric mixer. When the woman flicks the switch to mix the cookies she finds that her dog has pulled the plug. She doesn't know he's trying to save his pet and just thinks he's causing trouble. She puts the dog outside so that she can work uninterrupted. While the woman is putting the dog out, the kitten climbs out of the bowl and wanders off.

This all happens when no one is watching—except the audience. We now have *superior position*.

The woman returns to her cookies unaware there was ever a cat in her mix. Worried about his pet, the dog is outside looking through the window as the woman flips the mixer on. He is mortified as the beaters go to work on the batter and, he thinks, his little kitten.

I have seen this film in a movie theater and I have rarely heard such uproarious laughter than during this scene. The poor bulldog looks on in abject horror as the cookie dough is rolled out with a rolling pin, then cut by cookie-cutters, then put into an oven to bake.

Outside, the dog is a wreck. He blubbers like a baby and lies in a pool of his own tears.

Why is this so damned funny to an audience? And believe me it *is* funny.

It's funny because we know the cat is okay. Imagine how people would react if they thought the cute little kitten had been beaten, cut up, and baked. It wouldn't be very funny. But just letting the audience in on the joke allowed the storytellers to put that poor dog through hell.

Even frightening experiences in our own lives can be funny in the retelling because we have a superior position over our past selves. We know everything turned out okay.

Remember that you have this tool, and it can frighten or amuse an audience depending on how you apply it.

This kind of invisible ink is often overlooked by storytellers, but if you want to keep readers turning pages, or viewers watching, you would do well to master this technique. Alfred Hitchcock used it to engage filmgoers throughout his fifty-year career.

SHOW THEM ONCE SO THEY KNOW

This is a great tool for storytelling. It is almost always invisible to an audience.

In the film *The African Queen*, there is a sequence in which their small boat is trapped on a sandbar. Humphrey Bogart's character must get into the river and try to pull the boat free by hand. Unable to free the boat, he climbs back aboard. When Kathryn Hepburn notices that Bogart has leeches on him, Bogart goes into a panic. He is deathly afraid of, and disgusted by, leeches, and he trembles in horror. He is truly shaken by this event.

Shortly after the leeches have been removed, the characters realize there is nothing they can do to free the boat by staying aboard. So Bogart must try again to free the boat by hand. It means he must get back into the river. You can almost feel his dread as this realization sinks in.

When he starts down into the river we know how brave he is. We know that he's facing an obstacle that is particularly large for him. It is almost like he is his own clone character. We can measure his bravery next to his fear seen before.

This kind of invisible ink can be used a couple of ways.

Close Encounters of the Third Kind is a film that makes use of UFOs as part of its reality. There is a famous scene from that film.

Richard Dreyfuss is in his truck at night and he is lost. He stops his car in the middle of the road to check his map. Behind him, we see a pair of headlights drive up. Dreyfuss waves the car around. The driver goes around Dreyfuss' truck.

Very shortly after the scene is repeated almost exactly. Dreyfuss is stopped and looking at his map when a pair of headlights drives up. Without looking up from his map, Dreyfuss waves the car around. Unbeknownst to him the lights behind the truck rise vertically. (Good use of superior position, by the way.) It's a creepy scene.

It works so well because we saw the previous headlights behave in a normal fashion, so now we have a comparison for what is normal and what is strange. Very smart storytelling.

The interesting thing is that most people forget about the first set of headlights altogether, but it is what makes the second pair of lights strange and fantastic.

Speilberg does the same thing in the first *Jurassic Park* movie.

Knowing that the *Tyrannosaurus rex's* vision is based on motion, the Sam Neil character throws a road flare off into the distance so that the T-rex will follow the flare away from

kids it's attempting to eat. It works.

Shortly after this, Jeff Goldblum's character tries the same thing. He waves the flare to get the dinosaur's attention. The T-rex chases Goldblum. Then Goldblum throws the flare off to the side expecting the monster to follow—it does not. It never misses a step and continues after Goldblum.

This creates a tension in the audience because we know what was supposed to happen and how it went wrong.

They use this kind of invisible ink in Pixar's *Finding Nemo*. The tough fish has a plan to escape the tank where they are kept. As he tells the other fish his plan, the filmmakers show us exactly how the plan is supposed to work, so that when it later goes wrong the audience knows where and how the plan derails.

This creates a kind of wonderful anxiety in the audience members. They bite their collective nails as they follow along and plan is carried out. Will it work?

When I was a kid, I read a lot of magazines and books about special effects, and whenever they showed a photo of a miniature they would place a quarter or some such object next to it so the reader would have a sense of scale. One could see just how small the model was because we all know the size of a quarter.

This is akin to how the first two pigs are used in “The Three Little Pigs” story. As I said earlier, it is the failure of the first two pigs that allows us to measure the success of the third. In a sense, we have scale —things to compare.

We know how strange and unusual it is to have headlights float up instead of going around a car.

We feel that Jeff Goldblum is in real trouble with the T-rex because his plan doesn’t work as it should.

This form of invisible ink is often ignored by inexperienced story-crafters. They will often jump right to the third little pig expecting the audience will “get it.” It won’t.

Invisible ink is all about communicating with your audience clearly and getting it to feel and think what it needs to so it will experience your story.