Back to the Past: Writing Backstory

Presented by Laurie Marr Wasmund

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**Definitions of Backstory**

* James Scott Bell: Pre-story psychology that relates to the midpoint
* Also James Scott Bell: What has happened before the present disturbance/trouble that takes place in the current story
* Janet Burroway: Prequel to the current story
* Garth Stein: Now: the immediacy of drama that’s happening before us. Then: How we got there.
* Karen Russell: Unsettling echoes/ghosts of places past
* Agent Jeff Kleinman: The stuff the author thinks the reader should know, not the stuff the character desperately wants to tell the reader.

**What Backstory Adds to Your Work**

* Builds connection between the character and the reader
* Connects to your character’s real-time emotional reality
* Shows how character got into current situation
* Reveals motivation of the character
* Directly informs plot points and conflicts

**How to Create Backstory for Your Character**

* Write a timeline of character’s life events.
* Draw from real life to fill in details.
* Trust in reader’s life experience to fill in details.
* Explore your character’s trigger points: music, smells, touch. Most of this won’t go into the novel.

**Timing**

* Don’t open with backstory
* Answering questions too early: takes away incentive for reading
* Answering questions too late: interest is lost
* Prompted by real-time events
* Understand reader anticipation and prediction

**Techniques**

* Active Drop: James Bell Scott: Include backstory as part of the action itself
* Exposition: Tension between what reader knows and what they don’t
* Snapshots: Don’t overload reader with info-dumps
* Flashbacks: Thrown back in time
* Dialogue

**When You Edit**

* Examine your opening pages:
  + Does the reader really need to know this fact about the character?
  + Is it better to have the reader more invested in your character before they learn this fact?
* Examine the backstory you’ve written:
  + Is this a detail that I find interesting, but that isn’t crucial to the story? (Out!)
  + Will the story fall apart if I withhold this information? (In!)
  + Is there a better way to introduce this nugget of backstory aside from simply relating it?
  + Can I hint at the backstory and allow my reader to fill in the gaps with their imagination?
* When editing, highlight backstory in green and action in yellow. Have you struck a balance?

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