

2. HOW TO FIND A PLOT

An extraordinary legend has been built up around that simple little word *plot*, and anyone would think from all that is said in most books on writing and at most creative writing courses that a good, strong plot is essential, and moreover and more importantly that it must be original.

Nothing could be farther from the truth! None of the bestselling novels of recent years has any plot to speak of, and what plot they do have has almost invariably been pinched from someone else, such as the authors of the Old Testament, or William Shakespeare (who was himself an expert at using other people's ideas), or any contemporary author who seems to be on to a good thing. A few interesting plots may still be lying around, but there certainly aren't any original ones left. The Golden Rule, therefore, is: *don't worry about plot!*

But surely, you may be muttering, remembering the hard cash which you have paid for this book*, there must be some basic ideas on which you could work.

Indeed there are. Fundamentally, and it must be borne in mind that we are now considering bestselling novels only, and omitting whodunits, science fiction, horror and children's books, there are only four or five forms of plot worth bothering with. These may be called: the Cinderella plot, the Family plot, the Historical plot, the Revenge plot and the Save-the-World plot (the Save-the-World-Single-Handedly plot is even better).

* I hope you did buy it.

THE CINDERELLA PLOT

This concerns, of course, a disadvantaged girl (she doesn't actually have to live in the grate, nor need she be called 'Cinderella') who has a rich boy friend, and who has to overcome all kinds of obstacles before she can marry him*. If she is already married to him at the beginning of the story, then she has to overcome all sorts of obstacles in order to avoid being divorced. If she is already divorced at the beginning of the story (advanced stuff this, not to be recommended to beginners), then she has to overcome all manner of obstacles before she can marry her rich ex-husband again. And so on. The principal obstacle is the villainess[†], the Other Woman. Naturally, weak and feeble though she seems, your Cinderella is in fact as tough as old boots, and can climb over any obstacle put in her way. Of course, if you so desire you can twist the whole story inside out and turn the heroine into a handsome but wimpish male (Cinderfella, you might say) and the rich boy friend into a dominant, prototypical Women's Lib heiress (unless you want to write a gay novel, in which case the rich boy/girl-friend stays as he/she is – well, almost).

THE FAMILY PLOT

This plot has the great advantage that it can be made to go on for book after book, like *The Archers* on the BBC, or *Coronation Street* on ITV. It is usual to begin in late Victorian days, taking a family with a fair number of children (five or six is satisfactory, although you may like to have a few more that you can kill off in

* Or, in contemporary terms, let him move in with her.

† Villains are just as necessary in fiction as heroes and heroines, but since they are a minority group, political correctness demands that they should be, whenever possible, nice villains.

tragic death-bed scenes) and tracing their lives down through the years to the present. Although their life stories must be interwoven, you can go into each one in such detail that it would almost make a novel on its own. One of the children is always a very talented musician or an artist – the child's father will want to send this youngster down the mines, if a boy, or into the cotton factory if a girl. It is advisable to let one of the children bring disgrace on the family, and nowadays it is almost obligatory for another to be gay. A major problem with this type of story is that it involves so many characters that you, the author, forget who they are; the answer is to kill any spare ones off. It is helpful when doing so to remember that as well as major diseases, such as cancer, any form of heart attack and tuberculosis, lesser problems like scarlet fever, influenza, appendicitis, and almost any operation used to be killers. If you are fed up with using medical methods of extermination, you can always pack any useless, difficult or boring characters off on the *Titanic* or on a train going over the Tay Bridge.

A variation of the Family plot concentrates on the main female character, who is best described as 'indomitable'. Her life is a catalogue of disasters – her husband is a wastrel who loses his job, the family is evicted, her first-born dies, one of her daughters is foully betrayed, her sewing-machine, on which she earns a pittance to keep the family from starvation, breaks down and cannot be repaired, and so on and so on, not forgetting the problems her youngest son causes because he is, naturally, gay. Nothing fazes her – she battles on through thick and thin and ends up as the grandmother of a thriving family.

* She has old-fashioned prejudices.

THE HISTORICAL PLOT

The basic historical novel usually starts with the introduction of a poor young man – poor either because he is a bastard* and so cannot inherit his noble father's estate or because he is the rightful heir but has been done out of his inheritance by a bastard*. Your hero is absurdly handsome, a dab hand with a sword, and good enough on the lute to be on Top of the Pops. Before he can regain his wealth he has to travel all over the world, visiting such outlandish places as Trebizond, Far Cathay and the Indes (wherever they may be). On his travels he may be accompanied by a delectable female, who for no discernible reason insists on remaining a virgin.

This type of story must be set in the Middle Ages, so as to avoid having to do any research. The rationale for this statement is that no one knows enough about the Middle Ages to be able to criticise anything in the book's background material which you have invented. Don't ever write about well-known historical events, nor use any real-life historical characters; if you do, some know-it-all is bound to tell you, for instance, that Queen Elizabeth I, despite her propensity for sleeping in beds all over the place, never visited Bootle. You may feel that it is nevertheless important to avoid anachronisms, but one dropped in now and then can add excitement to your writing (as may be seen in the reference to Top of the Pops above).

By the way, you can forget that favourite mantra of Creative Writing tutors – *write about what you know*. Did Jules Verne go Round the World in 80 days? No. Did J.K. Rowling go to Hogwarts? No, she did not. Did P.G. Wodehouse himself have a Jeeves-like gentleman's

* This useful word has two meanings – make sure you know which is which.

gentleman? Not on your life. Did Joseph Heller serve in the US Air Force before writing *Catch-22*? Well, yes, he did, but you get the point, I hope.

THE REVENGE PLOT

The prototype of the revenge story is available, ready for re-use, in *The Count of Monte-Cristo*: to cover up their own crime, a group of rich, powerful and corrupt scoundrels falsely accuse the hero of whatever it is that they themselves have done; he is sent to jail; on release (or preferably escape) he stitches up each of them in turn. The only problem is that you must contrive to provide the hero with a lot of money, without which it's pretty difficult to stitch anyone up, let alone fat-cats like the nasties in this story.*.

THE SAVE-THE-WORLD-SINGLE-HANDEDLY PLOT

The idea in this case is to produce a clone of any James Bond story or of *The Day of the Jackal*. The head of the Secret Service, usually known solely by an initial, calls the hero (or why not make it the heroine in these enlightened days?) to the office to tell him/her that a simply appalling swine is on the point of plunging the world into an all-out nuclear war and the end of civilisation as we know it. The hero/heroine must liquidate the said swine and as many of his followers as he/she can without reloading his/her pistol.

Until Mr Gorbachev arrived the swine were invariably Russian. After that, they were all natives of some anonymous country in the Middle East, but that idea is old hat too. It's about time to revive Chinese baddies – as an example you could take Dr Fu Manchu, an unspeakable villain who appeared in thrillers written

* Try something easier.

by Sax Rohmer before World War II. Or you could use Robert Mugabe, or that nasty bit of work in North Korea (of course, he counts as Chinese anyway), or, depending on your politics, the next British Prime Minister (why not? Be bold).

If you insist, you could use this sort of plot for a science fiction story, the hero being a kind of superman (not Superman, of course), and the villain the ruler of an evil empire – great scope for imaginative names for your characters – Shegoon, Grumph, Vrip, for instance, or Flute, Snug, Starveling, come to that. In a variation on the contemporary Save-the-World story, a plot to assassinate an internationally recognised goodie figure, such as Queen Elizabeth II or the President of the United States (well, some people think he's a goodie), or perhaps even David Beckham, has been discovered, and our hero/heroine's job is to assassinate the assassin before the assassin assassinates the assassinee. In the course of carrying out these duties the hero/heroine is accompanied by the most beautiful girl in the world/the hunkiest male around. Neither of these partners has any inhibitions about preserving their innocence, and their sexual encounters form an important part of the novel, however irrelevant to the main plot they may be*. In addition, sex sessions with other women/men may be included, and extra interest is added when the hero/heroine knows that he/she is having it away with one of the baddies (or when the reader is aware of it and he/she isn't). As for the hero/heroine, his/her most notable characteristic is an ability to recover instantly, without a hair out of place, from any attempt on his/her life, and to be able rapidly to free himself/herself, with the abilities of Houdini, from situations in which escape

* Further discussion of this subject will follow in Chapter 3.

is apparently impossible even for so exceptional a character as your hero/heroine.

To make certain of pulling off a winner, it is best to combine at least three of these plots in one blockbuster. This will require a considerable dexterity on your part, so you may consider that it is too difficult. But don't give up. To give you a target to aim at, how about this? A girl despised by the other members of her poverty-stricken family is revealed as a brilliant shot with a rifle (Dad, who is a farm labourer has trained her to shoot rooks); the mysterious government department, MI93, hears of her prowess and commissions her to travel to Far Cathay, and there to put an end to Genghis Khan's plans for world domination; with her, as a minder, they send a rich and aristocratic Jude-Law-look-alike, whose grandfather is in one of Genghis Khan's prisons, wrongfully accused of simony. There you are – the plot of a sure-fire bestseller presented to you for free.