

Think Like a Writer

I was incredibly lucky to sell my first manuscript. The format was slightly off, there were numerous typing and grammatical errors but it still sold. Sometime later, when my 3rd novel was in production, I asked my editor why he took my book? Short, fat and bald, with an ever-present unlit cigar in his mouth, he was old school. If you asked him a direct question, you could expect a direct answer about 20 decibels louder than necessary. He told me, "Kid." He always called me "kid" even though at the time I was approaching 40. "I can hire English Lit majors fresh out of Columbia University for a dime a dozen to fix spelling and punctuation but none of them could write worth a sh*t . You think like a writer and not a reader."

To this day, no one in family will watch a mystery on television with me because part way through I tell them exactly how it is going to end. It has digressed to the point where my daughters will watch a movie first and challenge me to figure it out as they sit on the end of the couch with their arms folded, confident they've finally got me. The worst for the girls was "Usual Suspects," which I figured out almost instantly. "Somebody told you," my exasperated eldest shouted. In a sense, she was right. The writer had told me. The movie opens with Gabriel Byrne about to be shot by an unknown killer. We never see the killer's face but when he offers a cigarette to his soon to be victim he changes hands with his lighter. Byrne smiles and shakes his head. The moment Spacey appeared on the screen, with a deformed left hand, he was obviously the killer.

Obvious to anyone who thinks like a writer and not a reader.

To a writer, words are precious. Since novels can run from a few hundred pages to over 1,000, you can sprinkle nuggets like these around freely and the average reader will miss them as they read. In a movie or on television, it is necessary to bring these to the front because of time restrictions. In the case of "Usual Suspects" the writer made a point of having the killer change hands with the lighter. Then Gabriel Byrne smiled. Why change hands? Why smile? These are the questions a writer will ask when reading a novel or watching a movie. Why was that added? Why is that there?

If you want to become a novelist, you must condition yourself to think like a novelist. In a good book, the author will only put in things that drive the plot or help develop the characters. There may be "red herrings" or other devices to try and muddy the water, but after awhile you learn to separate the blue smoke and mirrors from the important stuff.

If you want to be a writer, you must learn to think like one.

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