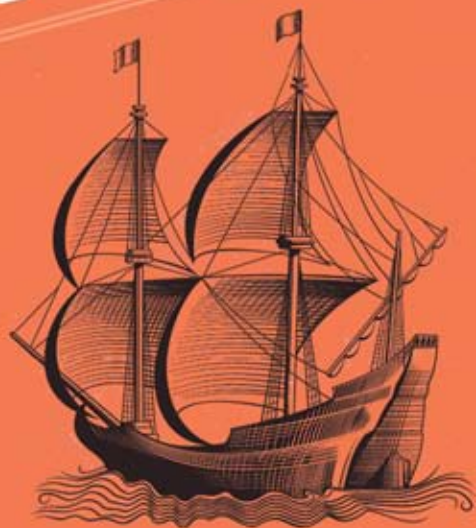


20
Master
PLOTS



AND HOW TO BUILD THEM

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from 20 Master Plots by Ronald Tobias

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MASTER PLOT 1: QUEST

1. A quest plot should be about a search for a person, place, or thing; develop a close parallel between your protagonist's intent and motivation and the object he's trying to find.
2. Your plot should move around a lot, visiting many people and places. But don't just move your character around as the wind blows. Movement should be orchestrated according to your plan of cause and effect. (You can make the journey *seem* like there's nothing guiding it—making it seem casual—but in fact it is causal.)
3. Consider bringing your plot full circle geographically. The protagonist frequently ends up in the same place where she started.
4. Make your character substantially different at the end of the story as a result of her quest. This plot is about the character who makes the search, not about the object of the search itself. Your character is in the process of changing during the course of the story. What or who is she becoming?
5. The object of the journey is wisdom, which takes the form of self-realization for the hero. Oftentimes this is the process of maturation. It may be about a child who learns the lessons of adulthood, but it also may be about an adult who learns the lessons of life.
6. Your first act should include a motivating incident, which initiates your hero's actual search. Don't just launch into a quest; make sure your readers understand *why* your character wants to go on the quest.

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7. Your hero should have at least one traveling companion. He must have interactions with other characters to keep the story from becoming too abstract or too interior. Your hero needs someone to bounce ideas off of, someone to argue with.
8. Consider including a helpful character.
9. Your last act should include your character's revelation, which occurs either after giving up the search or after successfully concluding it.
10. What your character discovers is usually different from what he originally sought.

MASTER PLOT 2: ADVENTURE

1. The focus of your story should be on the journey more than on the person making the journey.
2. Your story should concern a foray into the world, to new and strange places and events.
3. Your hero goes in search of fortune; it is never found at home.
4. Your hero should be motivated by someone or something to begin the adventure.
5. The events in each of your acts depend on the same chain of cause-and-effect relationships that motivates your hero at the beginning.
6. Your hero doesn't necessarily have to change in any meaningful way by the end of the story.
7. Adventures often include romance.

MASTER PLOT 3: PURSUIT

1. In the pursuit plot, the chase is more important than the people who take part in it.
2. Make sure there's a real danger of the pursued getting caught.
3. Your pursuer should have a reasonable chance of catching the pursued; he may even capture the pursued momentarily.
4. Rely heavily on physical action.
5. Your story and your characters should be stimulating, engaging, and unique.
6. Develop your characters and situations against type in order to avoid clichés.
7. Keep your situations as geographically confined as possible; the smaller the area for the chase, the greater the tension.
8. The first dramatic phase should have three stages: a) establish the ground rules for the chase, b) establish the stakes, and c) start the race with a motivating incident.

MASTER PLOT 4: RESCUE

1. The rescue plot relies more on action than on the development of characterization.
2. Your character triangle should consist of a hero, a villain, and a victim. The hero should rescue the victim from the villain.
3. The moral argument of the rescue plot tends to be black and white.
4. The focus of your story should be on the hero's pursuit of the villain.
5. Your hero should go out into the world to pursue the villain, and usually must contend with the villain on the villain's turf.
6. Your hero should be defined by her relationship to the villain.
7. Use your antagonist as a device whose purpose is to deprive the hero of what he believes is rightfully his.
8. Make sure the antagonist constantly interferes with the hero's progress.
9. The victim is generally the weakest of the three characters and serves mainly as a mechanism to force the hero to confront the antagonist.
10. Develop the three dramatic phases of separation, pursuit, and confrontation and reunion.

MASTER PLOT 5: ESCAPE

1. Escape is always literal. Your hero should be confined against his will (often unjustly) and wants to escape.
2. The moral argument of your plot should be black and white.
3. Your hero should be the victim (as opposed to the rescue plot, in which the hero saves the victim).
4. Your first dramatic phase deals with the hero's imprisonment and any initial attempts at escape, which fail.
5. Your second dramatic phase deals with the hero's plans for escape. These plans are almost always thwarted.
6. Your third dramatic phase deals with the actual escape.
7. The antagonist has control of the hero during the first two dramatic phases; the hero gains control in the last dramatic phase.

MASTER PLOT 6: REVENGE

1. Your protagonist seeks retaliation against the antagonist for a real or imagined injury.
2. Most (but not all) revenge plots focus more on the act of the revenge than on a meaningful examination of the character's motives.
3. The hero's justice is "wild," vigilante justice that usually goes outside the limits of the law.
4. Revenge plots tend to manipulate the feelings of the reader by avenging the injustices of the world by a man or woman of action who is forced to act by events when the institutions that normally deal with these problems prove inadequate.
5. Your hero should have moral justification for vengeance.
6. Your hero's vengeance may equal but may not exceed the offense perpetrated against the hero (the punishment must fit the crime).
7. Your hero first should try to deal with the offense in traditional ways, such as relying on the police—an effort that usually fails.
8. The first dramatic phase establishes the hero's normal life; then the antagonist interferes with it by committing a crime. Make the audience understand the full impact of the crime against the hero, and what it costs both physically and emotionally.

Your hero then gets no satisfaction by going through official channels and realizes he must pursue his own cause if he wants to avenge the crime.

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9. The second dramatic phase includes your hero making plans for revenge and then pursuing the antagonist.

Your antagonist may elude the hero's vengeance either by chance or design. This act usually pits the two opposing characters against each other.

10. The last dramatic phase includes the confrontation between your hero and antagonist. Often the hero's plans go awry, forcing him to improvise. Either the hero succeeds or fails in his attempts. In contemporary revenge plots, the hero usually doesn't pay much of an emotional price for the revenge. This allows the action to become cathartic for the audience.

MASTER PLOT 7: THE RIDDLE

1. The core of your riddle should be cleverness: hiding that which is in plain sight.
2. The tension of your riddle should come from the conflict between what happens as opposed to what seems to have happened.
3. The riddle challenges the reader to solve it before the protagonist does.
4. The answer to your riddle should always be in plain view without being obvious.
5. The first dramatic phase should consist of the generalities of the riddle (persons, places, events).
6. The second dramatic phase should consist of the specifics of the riddle (how persons, places, and events relate to each other in detail).
7. The third dramatic phase should consist of the riddle's solution, explaining the motives of the antagonist(s) and the real sequence of events (as opposed to what seemed to have happened).
8. Decide on your audience.
9. Choose between an open-ended and a close-ended structure. (Open-ended riddles have no clear answer; close-ended ones do).

MASTER PLOT 8: RIVALRY

1. The source of your conflict should come as a result of an irresistible force meeting an immovable object.
2. The nature of your rivalry should be the struggle for power between the protagonist and the antagonist.
3. The adversaries should be equally matched.
4. Although their strengths needn't match exactly, one rival should have compensating strengths to match the other.
5. Begin your story at the point of initial conflict, briefly demonstrating the status quo before the conflict begins.
6. Start your action by having the antagonist instigate against the will of the protagonist. This is the catalyst scene.
7. The struggle between your rivals should be a struggle on the characters' power curves. One is usually inversely proportional to the other: As the antagonist rises on the power curve, the protagonist falls.
8. Have your antagonist gain superiority over your protagonist in the first dramatic phase. The protagonist usually suffers the actions of the antagonist and so is usually at a disadvantage.
9. The sides are usually clarified by the moral issues involved.
10. The second dramatic phase reverses the protagonist's descent on the power curve through a reversal of fortune.
11. The antagonist is often aware of the protagonist's empowerment.

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12. The protagonist often reaches a point of parity on the power curve before a challenge is possible.
13. The third dramatic phase deals with the final confrontation between rivals.
14. After resolution, the protagonist restores order for himself and his world.

MASTER PLOT 9: UNDERDOG

1. The underdog plot is similar to the rivalry plot except that the protagonist is not matched equally against the antagonist. The antagonist, which may be a person, place, or thing (such as a bureaucracy), clearly has much greater power than the protagonist.
2. The dramatic phases are similar to the rivalry plot as it follows the power curves of the characters.
3. The underdog usually (but not always) overcomes his opposition.

MASTER PLOT 10: TEMPTATION

1. The temptation plot is a character plot. It examines the motives, needs, and impulses of human character.
2. Your temptation plot should depend largely on morality and the effects of giving in to temptation. By the end of the story, the character should have moved from a lower moral plane (in which she gives in to temptation) to a higher moral plane as a result of learning the sometimes harsh lessons of giving in to temptation.
3. The conflict of your plot should be interior and take place within the protagonist, although it has exterior manifestations in the action. The conflict should result from the protagonist's inner turmoil—a result of knowing what she should do, and then not doing it.
4. The first dramatic phase should establish the nature of the protagonist first, followed by the antagonist (if there is one).
5. Next, introduce the nature of the temptation, establish its effect on the protagonist, and show how the protagonist struggles over her decision.
6. The protagonist then gives in to the temptation. There may be some short-term gratification.
7. The protagonist often will rationalize her decision to yield to temptation.
8. The protagonist also may go through a period of denial after yielding to the temptation.
9. The second dramatic phase should reflect the effects of yielding to the temptation. Short-term benefits sour and the nega-

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tive side surfaces. The bill starts to come due for making the wrong decision.

10. The protagonist should try to find a way to escape responsibility and punishment for her act.
11. The negative effects of the protagonist's actions should reverberate with increasing intensity in the second dramatic phase.
12. The third dramatic phase should resolve the protagonist's internal conflicts. The story ends with atonement, reconciliation, and forgiveness.

MASTER PLOT 11: METAMORPHOSIS

1. The metamorphosis is usually the result of a curse.
2. The cure for the curse is generally love.
3. The forms of love include love of parent for a child, a woman for a man (or vice versa), people for each other, or for the love of God.
4. The metamorph is usually cast as the protagonist.
5. The point of the plot is to show the process of transformation back to humanity.
6. Metamorphosis is a character plot; consequently, we care more about the nature of the metamorph than his actions.
7. The metamorph is an innately sad character.
8. The metamorph's life is usually bound by rituals and prohibitions.
9. The metamorph usually wants to find a way out of his predicament.
10. There is usually a way out of that predicament, which is called release.
11. The terms of the release are almost always carried out by the antagonist.
12. If the curse can be reversed by the antagonist performing certain acts, the protagonist cannot either hurry or explain the events.

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13. In the first dramatic phase, the metamorph usually can't explain the reasons for his curse. We see him in the state of his curse.
14. Your story should begin at the point prior to the resolution of the curse (release).
15. The antagonist should act as the catalyst that propels the protagonist toward release.
16. The antagonist often starts out as the intended victim but ends up as the "chosen one."
17. The second dramatic phase should concentrate on the nature of evolving relationships between the antagonist and the metamorph.
18. The characters will generally move toward each other emotionally.
19. In the third dramatic phase, the terms of release should be fulfilled and your protagonist should be freed from the curse. The metamorph may either revert to his original state or die.
20. The reader should learn the reasons for the curse and its root causes.

MASTER PLOT 12: TRANSFORMATION

1. The plot of transformation should deal with the process of change as the protagonist journeys through one of the many stages of life.
2. The plot should isolate a portion of the protagonist's life that represents the period of change, moving from one significant character state to another.
3. The story should concentrate on the nature of change and how it affects the protagonist from start to end of the experience.
4. The first dramatic phase should relate the transforming incident that propels the antagonist into a crisis, which starts the process of change.
5. The second dramatic phase generally should depict the effects of the transformation. Since this plot is about character, the story will concentrate on the protagonist's self-examination.
6. The third dramatic phase should contain a clarifying incident, which represents the final stage of the transformation. The character understands the true nature of his experience and how it has affected him. Generally this is the point of the story at which true growth and understanding occur.
7. Often the price of wisdom is a certain sadness.

MASTER PLOT 13: MATURATION

1. Create a protagonist who is on the cusp of adulthood, whose goals are either confused or not yet clarified.
2. Make sure the audience understands who the character is and how she feels and thinks before an event occurs that begins the process of change.
3. Contrast your protagonist's naive life (childhood) against the reality of an unprotected life (adulthood).
4. Focus your story on your protagonist's moral and psychological growth.
5. Once you've established your protagonist as she was before the change, create an incident that challenges her beliefs and her understanding of how the world works.
6. Does your character reject or accept change? Perhaps both? Does she resist the lesson? How does she act?
7. Show your protagonist undergoing the process of change. It should be gradual, not sudden.
8. Make sure your young protagonist is convincing; don't give her adult values and perceptions until she is ready to portray them.
9. Don't try to accomplish adulthood all at once. Small lessons often represent major upheavals in the process of growing up.
10. Decide at what psychological price this lesson comes, and establish how your protagonist copes with it.

MASTER PLOT 14: LOVE

1. The prospect of love should always be met with a major obstacle. Your characters may want it, but they can't have it for any variety of reasons. At least not right away.
2. The lovers are usually ill-suited in some way. They may come from different social classes (beauty queen/nerd; Montague and Capulet) or they may be physically unequal (one is blind or handicapped).
3. The first attempt to solve the obstacle is almost always thwarted. Success doesn't come easily. Love must be proven by dedication and stick-to-it-iveness.
4. As one observer once put it, love usually consists of one person offering the kiss and the other offering the cheek, meaning one lover is more aggressive in seeking love than the other. The aggressive partner is the seeker, who completes the majority of the action. The passive partner (who may want love just as much) still waits for the aggressive partner to overcome the obstacles. Either role can be played by either sex.
5. Love stories don't need to have happy endings. If you try to force a happy ending on a love story that clearly doesn't deserve one, your audience will refuse it. True, Hollywood prefers happy endings, but some of the world's best love stories (Anna Karenina, Madame Bovary, Heloise and Abelard) are very sad.
6. Concentrate on your main characters to make them appealing and convincing. Avoid the stereotypical lovers. Make your characters and their circumstances unique and interesting. Love is one of the hardest subjects to write about because it's been written about so often, but that doesn't mean it can't be

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done well. You will have to feel deeply for your characters, though. If you don't, neither will your readers.

7. Emotion is an important element in writing about love. Not only should you be convincing, but you should develop the full range of feelings: fear, loathing, attraction, disappointment, reunion, consummation, etc. Love has many feelings associated with it and you should be prepared to develop them according to the needs of your plot.
8. Understand the role of sentiment and sentimentality in your writing and decide which is better for your story. If you're writing a formula romance, you may want to use the tricks of sentimentality. If you're trying to write a one-of-a-kind love story, you will want to avoid sentimentality and rely on true sentiment in your character's feelings.
9. Take your lovers through the full ordeal of love. Make sure they are tested (individually and collectively) and that they finally deserve the love they seek. Love is earned; it is not a gift. Love untested is not true love.

MASTER PLOT 15: FORBIDDEN LOVE

1. Forbidden love is any love that goes against the conventions of society, so there is usually either an explicit or implicit force exerted against the lovers.
2. The lovers ignore social convention and pursue their hearts, usually with disastrous results.
3. Adultery is the most common form of forbidden love. The adulterer may either be the protagonist or antagonist, depending on the nature of the story. The same is true for the offended spouse.
4. The first dramatic phase should define the relationship between partners and phrase it in its social context. What are the taboos that they have broken? How do they handle it themselves? How do the people around them handle it? Are the lovers moonstruck, or do they deal with the realities of their affair head-on?
5. The second dramatic phase should take the lovers into the heart of their relationship. The lovers may start out in an idyllic phase, but as the social and psychological realities of their affair become clear, the affair may start to dissolve or come under great pressure to dissolve.
6. The third dramatic phase should take the lovers to the end point of their relationship and settle all the moral scores. The lovers are usually separated, either by death, force, or desertion.

MASTER PLOT 16: SACRIFICE

1. The sacrifice should come at a great personal cost; your protagonist is playing for high stakes, either physical or mental.
2. Your protagonist should undergo a major transformation during the course of the story, moving from a lower moral state to a higher one.
3. Make the events force your protagonist's decision.
4. Make sure you lay an adequate foundation of character so the reader understands his progress on the path to making sacrifice.
5. Remember that all events should be a reflection of your main character. They test and develop character.
6. Make clear the motivation of your protagonist so the reader understands why he would make that kind of sacrifice.
7. Show the line of action through the line of your character's thought.
8. Have a strong moral dilemma at the center of your story.

MASTER PLOT 17: DISCOVERY

1. Remember that the discovery plot is more about the character making the discovery than the discovery itself. This isn't a search for the secrets of the lost tombs of some Incan king; it's a search for understanding about human nature. Focus your story on the character, not on what the character does.
2. Start your plot with an understanding of who the main character is *before* circumstances change and force the character into new situations.
3. Don't linger on your main character's "former" life; integrate past with present and future. Place the character on the cusp of change. Start the action as late as possible, but also give the reader a strong impression of the main character's personality as it was before events started to change her character.
4. Make sure the catalyst that forces the change (from a state of equilibrium to disequilibrium) is significant and interesting enough to hold the reader's attention. Don't be trivial. Don't dwell on insignificant detail.
5. Move your character into the crisis (the clash between the present and the past) as quickly as possible, but maintain the tension of past and present as a fundamental part of your story's tension.
6. Maintain a sense of proportion. Balance action and emotion so that they remain believable. Make sure your character's revelations are in proportion to the events.
7. Don't exaggerate either your character's emotions or the actions of your character to "force" emotions from her. (This maintains proportion.) Avoid being melodramatic.

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8. Don't preach or force your characters to carry your messages for you. Let your characters and their circumstances speak for themselves. Let the reader draw his own conclusions based on the events of the story.

MASTER PLOT 18: WRETCHED EXCESS

1. Wretched excess is generally about the psychological decline of a character.
2. Base the decline of your character on a character flaw.
3. Present the decline of your character in three phases: how he is before events start to change him; how he is as he successively deteriorates; and what happens after events reach a crisis point, forcing him either to give in completely to his flaw (tragedy) or to recover from it.
4. Develop your character so that his decline evokes sympathy. Don't present him as a raving lunatic.
5. Take particular care in the development of your character, because the plot depends on your ability to convince the audience that he is both real and worthy of their feelings for him.
6. Avoid melodrama. Don't try to force emotion beyond what the scene can carry.
7. Be straightforward with information that allows the reader to understand your main character. Don't hide anything that will keep your reader from being empathetic.
8. Most writers want the audience to feel for the main character, so don't make your character commit crimes out of proportion of our understanding of who and what he is. It's hard to be sympathetic with a person who's a rapist or a serial murderer.
9. At the crisis point of your story, move your character either toward complete destruction or redemption. Don't leave him

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swinging in the wind, because your reader will definitely not be satisfied.

10. Action in your plot should always relate to character. Things happen *because* your main character does (or does not) do certain things. The cause and effects of your plot should always relate either directly or indirectly to your main character.
11. Don't lose your character in his madness. Nothing beats personal experience when it comes to this plot. If you don't understand the nature of the excess yourself (having experienced it), be careful about having your character do things that aren't realistic for the circumstances. Do your homework. Understand the nature of the excess you want to write about.

MASTER PLOTS 19 & 20: ASCENSION & DESCENSION

1. The focus of your story should be about a single character.
2. That character should be strong-willed, charismatic, and seemingly unique. All of your other characters will revolve around this one.
3. At the heart of your story should be a moral dilemma. This dilemma tests the character of your protagonist/antagonist, and it is the foundation for the catalyst of change in her character.
4. Character and event are closely related to each other. Anything that happens should happen because of the main character. She is the force that affects events, not the reverse. (This isn't to say that events can't affect your main character, but that we are more interested in how she acts upon the world than how the world acts upon her.)
5. Try to show your character as she was before the major change that altered her life so we have a basis of comparison.
6. Show your character progressing through successive changes as a result of events. If it is a story about a character who overcomes horrible circumstances, show the nature of that character while she still suffers under those circumstances. Then show us how events change her nature during the course of the story. Don't "jump" from one character state to another; that is, show how your character moves from one state to another by giving us her motivation and intent.
7. If your story is about the fall of a character, make certain the reasons for her fall are a result of character and not gratuitous

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circumstances. The reason for a rise may be gratuitous (the character wins \$27 million in LottoAmerica), but not the reasons for her fall. The reasons for a character's ability to overcome adversity should also be the result of her character, not some contrivance.

8. Try to avoid a straight dramatic rise or fall. Vary the circumstances in the character's life: Create rises and falls along the way. Don't just put your character on a rocket to the top and then crash. Vary intensity of the events, too. It may seem for a moment that your character has conquered her flaw, when in fact, it doesn't last long. And vice versa. After several setbacks, the character finally breaks through (as a result of her tenacity, courage, belief, etc.).
9. Always focus on your main character. Relate all events and characters to your main character. Show us the character before, during, and after the change