Phoenix Rising--

Death and Loss to Create Conflict

By Molly Blaisdell

As writers we want to create stories that brim with genuine conflict. We want true stories with living, breathing characters that will linger in minds our readers. The relationship between character and conflict is undeniable. And let's face it; one of the best ways to create conflict for our characters is through a death.

Create a Conflict Engine

The pets die, the parents die, the siblings die, the friend dies, the grandparent dies. These events are great 'conflict engines' for stories. They drive the action forward by causing a cascade of intense emotional tension. Death is the catalyst that has lead to many a plot. Death moves story forward because the event of death causes inward and outward changes to every character within in a plot arc. Ultimately death is the fertile ground for the phoenix of story to arise. In some way death appears in every story. The idea that a character must change is essential to story. Death has many faces -- the end of our fears, our relationships, our personalities, our way of life.

Provide Cascading Story Action

Children's writers are nice people, but their characters have a hard time surviving in their stories. Children's writers are not sitting in front of their computers, chanting -- kill the dog, cat, bird, pig, parent, neighbor, clone or what ever other handy unfortunate character might come to mind -- they are really not. It's just their job to write a story with palatable tension, with events that the child can identify with, with an event that a child will follow to the end, with an experience that will ultimately lift up or satisfy the child. Unfortunately, this frequently requires the writer to kill someone or something. Think Bambi: A Life in the Woods (1923) by Felix Salten. He killed the deer and the mother in one swift sentence providing a great classic with ample cascading story action.

Review Classic and Contemporary Examples

Death is often the heart of conflict. Examples abound in children's writing. Great classics like Where the Red Fern Grows, Sounder, and Old Yellow, all testify to the power of killing the dog. Man's best friend is the most beleaguered of the animal kingdom of course. Charlotte's Web another great classic, here we have threatened life of pig and real death of spider. On to contemporary favorites, Tale of Desperaux, we kill mom and threaten everyone else. In A Great and Terrible Beauty by Libba Bray, the mother is murdered in the first scene setting the death. Wenny Has Wings by Janet Lee Carey death of a younger sister serves as the catalyst of a story. Many Stones by Carolyn Coman has the death of an older sister as a plot catalyst. A number of these books, keeping a close eye on how these books reach their readers through an emotional core of death.

Look for the heart of your story

If you've written a story, like the characters but feel that plot is weak, you need to ask yourself., "Who needs to die?" Readers hunger for timeless movement of death and rebirth within story. Does your main character have a pet? Would your story be stronger if that pet died? Is your ending to pat and perhaps sappy? Would this story benefit by exploring the ramifications of a secondary character dying? Often a story lacks emotional punch because the writer has been unwilling to step up to harsh realities of life. Good story telling is a willingness to be brave, to step beyond the veil of safety and cast your character into rough seas.

Not willing to explore death? Threaten life.

Now, not every writer can bring their self to do the deed. Threatening life is a good way to build sustainable tension and works well in works for younger children. Dogs again are a favorite target. One of our best 'threaten the dog' icons is Lassie. How about when Salty the dog fell out of that airplane in Ted and Gloria Rand's book, that was one heart wrenching move. Cynthia Rylant, Henry and Mudge series goes for the gentle dog problem, poor Mudge is lost. Will we ever see him again? And the unwritten sub-text --is Mudge all right? Notes to a Liar and her Dog by Gennifer Choldenko, the poor pooch is threatened by a lion in this story. In Because of Winn Dixie by Kate DiCamilio, Winn Dixie will go to the pound and most likely die if our heroine doesn't step up and do something. In a nice turn of events, Winn Dixie turns everything around and saves every character in the story. Something to think about -- dogs are hit hard in books for young readers. A dog is often the most vulnerable life in the world of a young child and serves well in developing the first pangs of death, helping children deal with early steps on the road of life's realities.

Exercises to Sharpen your Story Skills

Write about your first experience with the death of a pet. Explore the emotions of that moment. Include the sensory details. Add the dialogue of the people present when your pet died. Now, write about your first experience with death of a person. How did you feel? How old were you? What were the sensory details of that moment? Where were you? Try writing every detail of the setting. How did you feel about that death? Were your feelings different than those around you? Try expanding this exercise by asking several people you know about their first experience with death and writing short scenes about those experiences, too. The purpose here is to create an authentic, emotional account of death. This will help you achieve a realistic form of death within your stories. As with all good storytelling, pay attention to the details.

The phoenix is a legendary bird. It dies every day and rises the next day from its ashes. This is never ending cycle. Try to find the phoenix in your story, use death and loss to bring conflict to a bland story, and in the end breathe life into your storytelling.