

10. UNDERSTANDING GENRE

“Genre” simply means a kind of literature (usually fiction) dealing with a particular topic, setting, or issue. Even so-called “mainstream” fiction has its genres: the coming-of-age story, for example.

In the last few decades, genre in North America has come to mean types of fiction that are commercially successful because they are predictable treatments of familiar material: the Regency romance, the hard-boiled detective novel, the space opera. Some readers, writers and critics dismiss such fiction precisely because of its predictability, and they’re often right to do so.

But even the humblest hackwork requires a certain level of craft, and that means you must understand your genre’s conventions if you are going to succeed—and especially if you are going to convey your message by tinkering with those conventions.

For our purposes, a “convention” is an understanding between writer and reader about certain details of the story. For example, we don’t need to know the history of the Mexican-American War to understand why a youth from Ohio is punching cattle in Texas in 1871. We don’t need to understand the post-Einstein physics that permits faster-than-light travel and the establishment of interstellar empires. And we agree that the heroine of a Regency romance should be heterosexual, unmarried, and unlikely to solve her problems through learning karate.

As a novice writer, you should understand your genre’s conventions consciously, not just as things you take for granted that help make a good yarn. In this, you’re like an apprentice cook who can’t just uncritically love the taste of tomato soup; you have to know what ingredients make it taste that way, and use them with some calculation.

So it might be useful for you, in one of your letters to yourself about your novel, to write out your own understanding and appreciation of the form you’re working in. I found this was especially helpful with a couple of my early books, which fell into the genre of the natural-disaster thriller. Here’s what I told myself about this genre:

1. The thriller portrays persons confronting problems they can’t solve by recourse to established institutions and agencies; calling 911, or a psychiatrist, won’t help matters in the slightest.

2. The problems not only threaten the characters' physical and mental safety, they threaten to bring down the society they live in: their families, their communities, their nations. This is what is at stake in the story, and should appear as soon as possible.
3. The solution to the characters' problems usually involves some degree of violence, illegality, technical expertise, and dramatic action, but not more than we can plausibly expect from people of the kind we have chosen to portray.
4. The *political thriller* portrays characters who must go outside their society if they are to save it, and the characters therefore acquire a certain ironic quality. They must be at least as skilled and ruthless as their adversaries, yet motivated by values we can understand and admire even if we don't share them.
5. The *disaster thriller* portrays characters who are either isolated from their society or who risk such isolation if they fail. That is, either they will die or their society will fall (or both) if they do not accomplish their goals. In the novel of *natural disaster*, the disaster comes early and the issue is who will survive and how. In the novel of *man-made disaster*, the issue is how (or whether) the characters will prevent the disaster.
6. The characters must be highly plausible and complex; where they seem grotesque or two-dimensional, we must give some valid reason for these qualities. They must have adequate motives for the extreme and risky actions they take, and they must respond to events with plausible human reactions. Those reactions should spring from what we know of the characters' personalities, and should throw new light on those personalities.
7. The protagonist's goal is to save or restore a threatened society; it is rarely to create a whole new society.
8. At the outset the protagonist only reacts to events; at some point, however, he or she embarks on the *counterthrust*, an attempt to take charge and overcome circumstances.
9. The progress of the protagonist is from ignorance to knowledge, accomplished through a series of increasingly intense and important conflicts. These lead to a climactic conflict and the resolution of the story.

10. With the climax the protagonist attains self-knowledge as well as understanding of his or her circumstances (or at least *we* attain such knowledge). This knowledge may well create a whole new perspective on the story's events and the characters' values: A murder may turn out to have been futile, or loyalty may have been betrayed. We should prepare for these insights early in the novel, so that the protagonist's change and development are logical and believable.

Assignment:

Write a similar analysis of your own preferred genre. It doesn't have to be in essay form. It just has to identify the key elements of the genre as you understand them, and that in turn should lead to ideas about how to tinker with the genre's conventions. And *that*, in turn, should make your story more than just a slavish imitation of your favorite author.

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