

## Chekov's gun

Don't shoot the reader if you've neglected your set ups!

It can take weeks, months, even years to write a novel, and one afternoon for a reader to devour it. It seems unfair, somehow. It's like dinner—hours of preparation, moments of eating, and all gone.

This is a potential BIG issue for novice writers (not dinner, although that could well be). Why?

- A novel isn't as spacious as you'd imagine. Anything you mention and focus on becomes a SET UP. In other, words, you're priming the reader to remember this particular clue/incidence, because it's coming up again later to...
- The PAY OFF. All of your perceptive reading culminates in this moment, and the reader buys your character's action/explanation, etc.

But, over the writing process, you've probably either forgotten what you've set up, or spent too much time lingering on something that's irrelevant to your plot, thereby meaning there's either no set ups, no pay offs, or both.

This equals a frustrated reader. *You mean I read a whole lot of detail about how to change a tyre, and...nothing? It had nothing to do with anything?* Yep.

### A proper set up

Needless to say, you need to set up your set ups. There's no 'winging it' here.

*Where the Crawdads Sing* introduces the key 'piece' of the novel – a homemade necklace made of red string and a seashell – when Kya and Chase are beginning their affair, it then turns up again when it's not found on his body, and then, for what happens twice, must happen thrice, it pops up again, solving the novel's mystery.

In this particular instance, the shell necklace has layers of meaning, and the final payoff packs a punch.

But for set ups to pay off, they don't have to be so 'obvious'. Even smaller details can be brought out at a later stage for big impact. For example, in *Holding up the Universe*, Libby spends a large amount of her childhood hiding at home, and making up stories about 'Sam, Dean and Castiel', the boys who live across the road. It's a tiny detail in her backstory, but the pay off when it's revealed still gives me gooseflesh.

In fact, it's better if it's not, "Hey, here's a clue/foreshadowing/warning, I'm just going to dump it here under the fluorescent flashing lights!" It needs to make

sense, and weave into your narrative seamlessly, almost as if the reader wouldn't notice it.

It also, ideally has to have a fair amount of time before the pay off. But not too much.

### **What qualifies as a 'plant'?**

Plenty things. Other characters. Lines of dialogue. Objects like that piece of jewellery.

Did you ever read the *Song of Ice and Fire* books, i.e. *Games of Thrones*? Any time the red woman looks into the future, she's searching frantically for signs of Stannis Baratheon as the future king, but then either her thoughts turn to Jon Snow, or Jon Snow's name would be mentioned, or the next paragraph would be about Jon Snow. Similar set ups are littered throughout these books in connection with Jon as the rightful ruler (maybe/probably not/is he ever going to finish these books?) \*Spoiler\* This was not paid off in the series, and it wouldn't have been an issue if the person who was chosen as king HAD been properly set up. But he wasn't, so it was.

### **Why use set ups?**

Credibility for future story events! You can't pluck a miracle from the ether – you have to artfully place the miracle so that it's logical, believable, full of righteous integrity.

Well-placed set ups:

- **Increase the credibility of your characters.** Mark recognizes when one of his classmate's has turned into a vampire in *Salem's Lot*. Our introduction to Mark includes his voracious appetite for monster movies and magazines, so, *duh*, of course he noticed his friend's peculiar affliction.
- **Increase tension.** Ah, Chekov's infamous gun. "If you say in the first chapter that there is a rifle hanging on the wall... in the second or third chapter, it absolutely must go off. If it's not going to be fired, it shouldn't be hanging on the wall." Next time you watch *Gremlins*, notice how when anyone slams the front door shut, a ceremonial blade falls from its place on the wall. What gets used when confronted with an army of gremlins?
- **Can be a joke (it's not all serious...).** An obvious example of this is Liam Neeson's character in *Love Actually*, who mentions many times how the only woman he'd consider in his life after his wife's death is Claudia Schiffer. Then, later on he meets Sam's mother...played by Claudia Schiffer.
- **Can support your novel's theme.** In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the parrot's clipped wings means it cannot escape the burning house, a warning of what's to come for the first Mrs. Rochester.

### **What about pay offs?**

They have to be satisfying, above all else. Not flat, or predictable, or worse, groan inducing.

They also have to exist. In *Grown Ups*, Marian Keyes sets up sooo many situations that she doesn't pay off, but the one that really had me frustrated was the repeated threat to Jessie's business if she didn't go online. Alas, no payoff for this set up. It remains permanently unresolved.

The worst though is the pay off without the set up, the *deus ex machina*. For me, that's always the ending of the first *Jurassic Park*. Out of nowhere, a T-Rex bursts in and saves the final four. Hmmmm. Believable? No. Satisfying? No.

### **When you re-read your first draft...**

- Check for any repeat references to someone or something in your first few chapters. Does this serve a future purpose in the story? If not, scale it back.
- If you've used a set up, does it merge into your overall narrative seamlessly?
- Have you repeated a reference to your set up somewhere between the original set up and payoff?
- Is your payoff satisfying?
- Now check for any payoff endings that come out of nowhere. How can you reverse engineer a viable set up?

Want to work with me in 2021?

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