

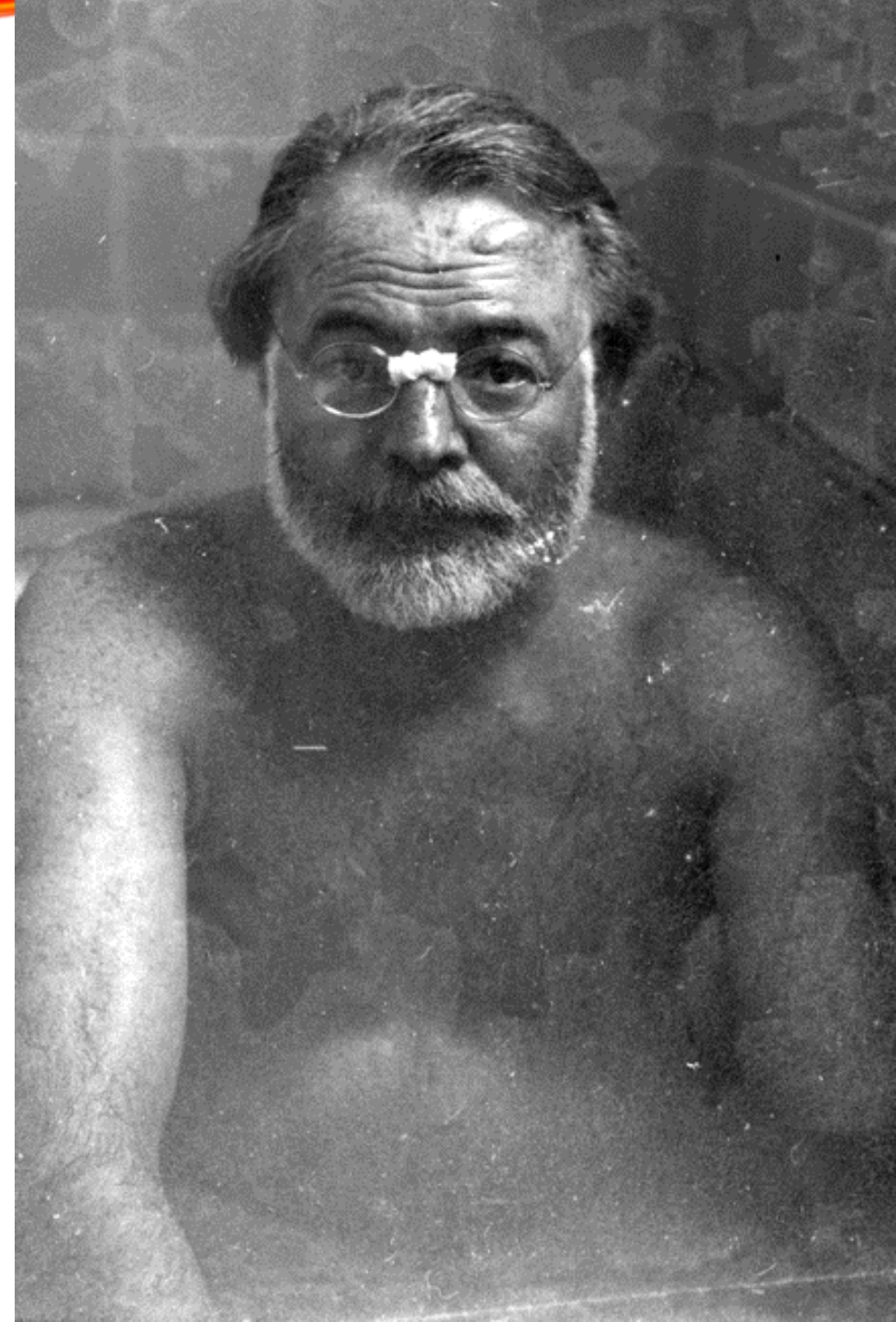


# EDIT YOURSELF

The Art and Skill of  
Assessing Your  
Own Stories

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“The first draft of anything is shit.”  
—Ernest Hemingway



# OVERVIEW

## Preparing to Edit

- Editing versus revising
- How to approach an edit
- The “right” way to edit

## Editing and Revision

- Story level
- Scene level
- Line level

## Getting Feedback



# EDITING VERSUS REVISING

**Editing** = assessing

Where is the story not working as effectively as it could?

**Revising** = addressing

How to shore up areas of weakness

**How to find the issues vs. how to fix them**

# EDITING AND REVISING...

- Are a normal part of the process
- Are where the story comes to life
- **Are the main work of writing**



# REDISCOVERING YOUR OBJECTIVITY



Time/distance



New place/environment



Print out



Read in a different format (e-reader)



Read aloud; have it read to you



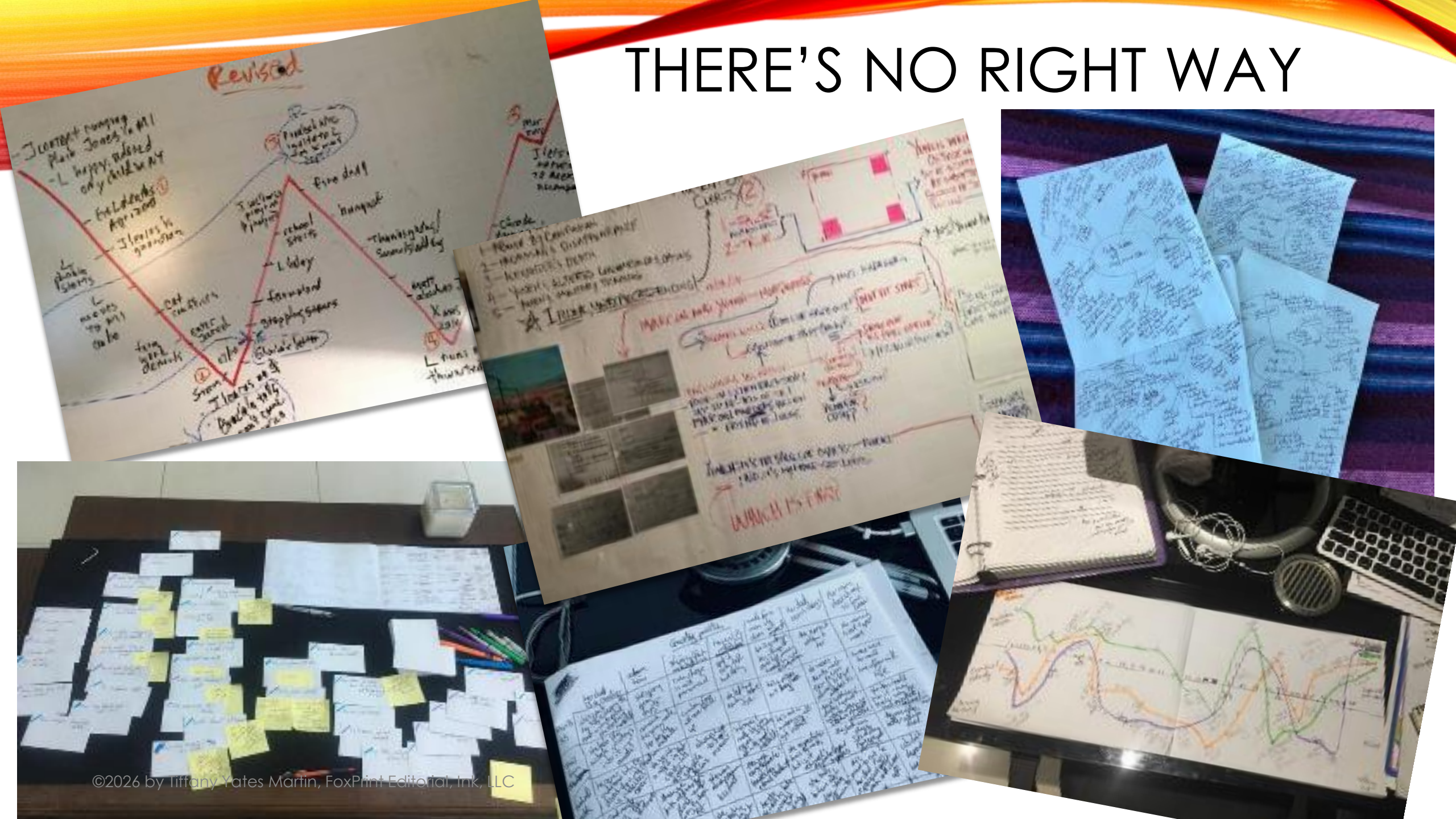
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# THE “TRIAGE” METHOD

1. Objectivity
2. Wear the right hat: read like a reader
3. “Feel the story” and make *brief* notes
4. Address major story-level issues (macroediting)
5. Address scene-level issues (microediting)
6. Address line-level issues
7. Repeat as needed

# THERE'S NO RIGHT WAY



# STORY LEVEL

# WHAT IS YOUR STORY ABOUT?

Who is the character?

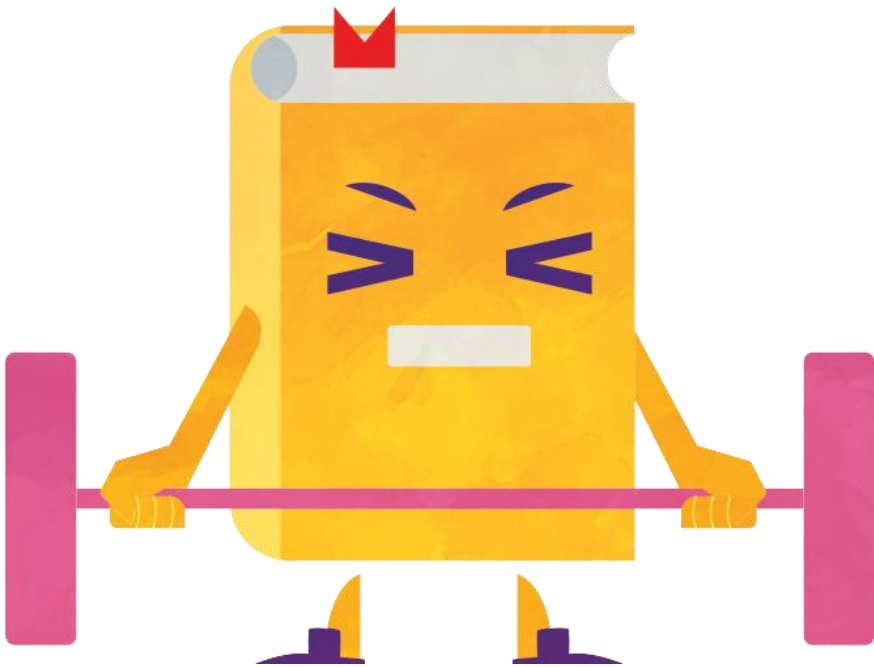
What do they want?

What do they do to get it?

What's in their way?

Why does it matter?

# EXERCISE



“[Protagonist] is a [defining character trait(s)/situation] struggling with/wanting [goal/longing]. But when [change of circumstances] happens, they must [main plot action] in order to [avoid/attain goal] or else/so that [consequences/stakes].”

# EXAMPLE: *THE HUNGER GAMES*

Katniss Everdeen is a tough, practical, resourceful girl raised in an oppressive society  
(key character descriptors) (situation)

who is determined to ensure her family's survival, but struggles to keep them fed and safe  
(goal/longing) (thing in the way)

But when her sister is chosen as a Hunger Games contestant, she must  
(change of circumstances)

take Prim's place and fight for survival to return to her family, battling  
(main plot action) (reward)

lack of strength/skill, inadequate weapons, the other contestants, fear, hornets, Snow, etc.  
(obstacle, fear, challenge)

# YOUR TURN

X is a \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_  
(key character descriptors) (situation)

who \_\_\_\_\_, but \_\_\_\_\_.  
(goal/longing) (thing in the way)

But when \_\_\_\_\_,  
(change of circumstances)

she must \_\_\_\_\_,  
(main plot action)

despite \_\_\_\_\_,  
(obstacle, fear, challenge)

so that/or else \_\_\_\_\_.  
(consequences/reward)

# CHARACTER

Readers don't care what's happening unless we care **who it's happening to.**



# WHO IS THE CHARACTER?



**Personality**

**Background**

**Circumstances/situation**

# WHAT DRIVES THE CHARACTER?



**Internal (broad) and external, tangible goal**

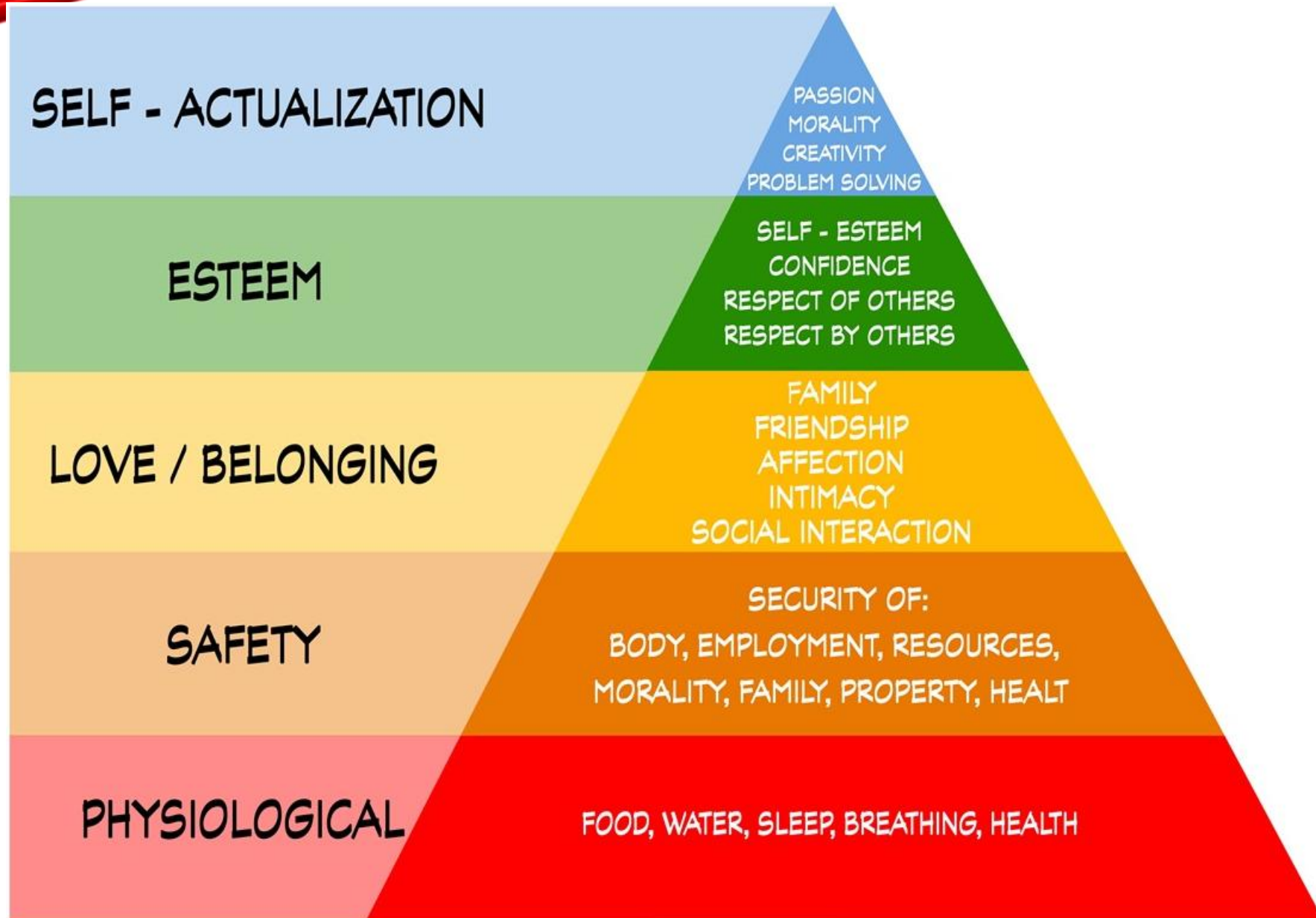


**Top-level and deeper motivation**



**Core longing/lack**

# BASIC HUMAN DRIVES





# STAKES

What does the character stand to gain or lose, and why does it matter?

STAKES  
SHOULD  
BE...



**Personal**



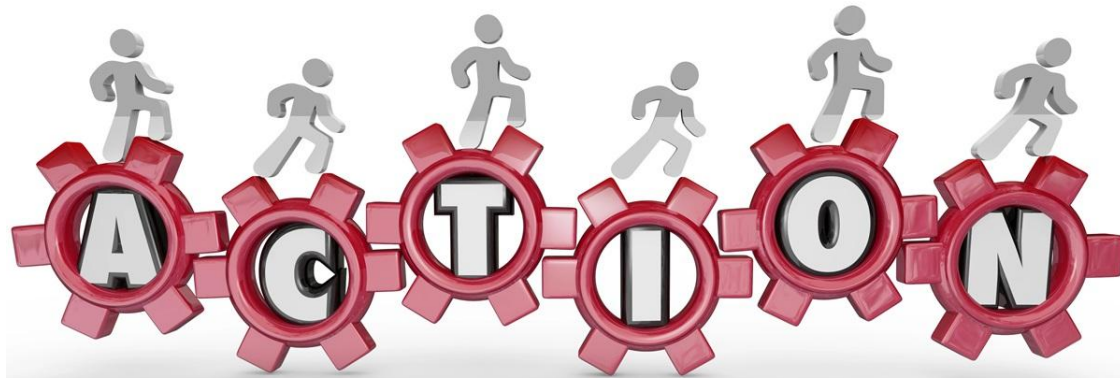
**Meaningful**



**Concrete and specific**



**Urgent**



# PLOT

What does the character **do**, because of *who they are*, in pursuit of what *they most deeply want*?

# PLOT ISN'T ACTION; ACTION ISN'T STORY

What does the protag do to achieve their goal? (These are your action points)



What stands in their way at each step?

How do they overcome/avoid those obstacles?

How do they change or grow **as a direct result** of their experiences?

# CHARACTER DRIVES PLOT

Not “what happens next,” but what does your character do and why; what happens as a result; how does your character react/adjust?



**Objective**



**Action**



**Reaction**



**Regroup**

# HOW DOES IT HOLD TOGETHER?



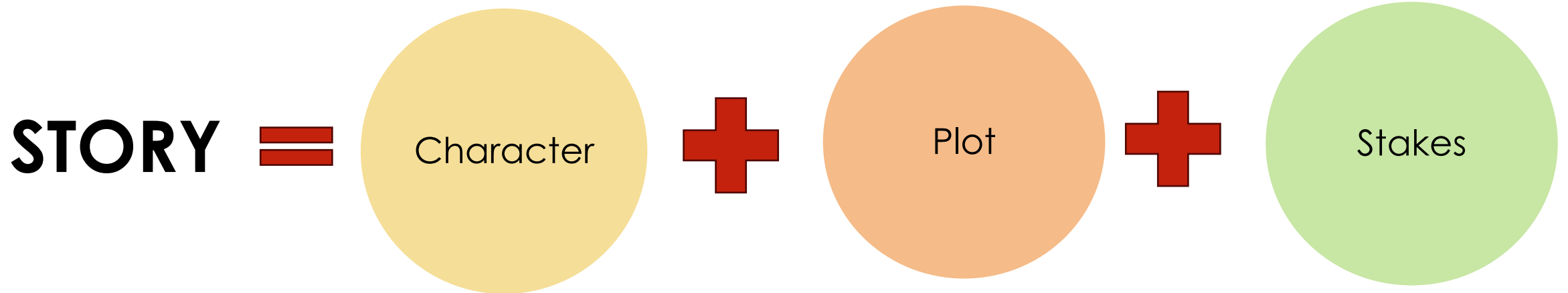
COHESION



MOMENTUM

# COHESION

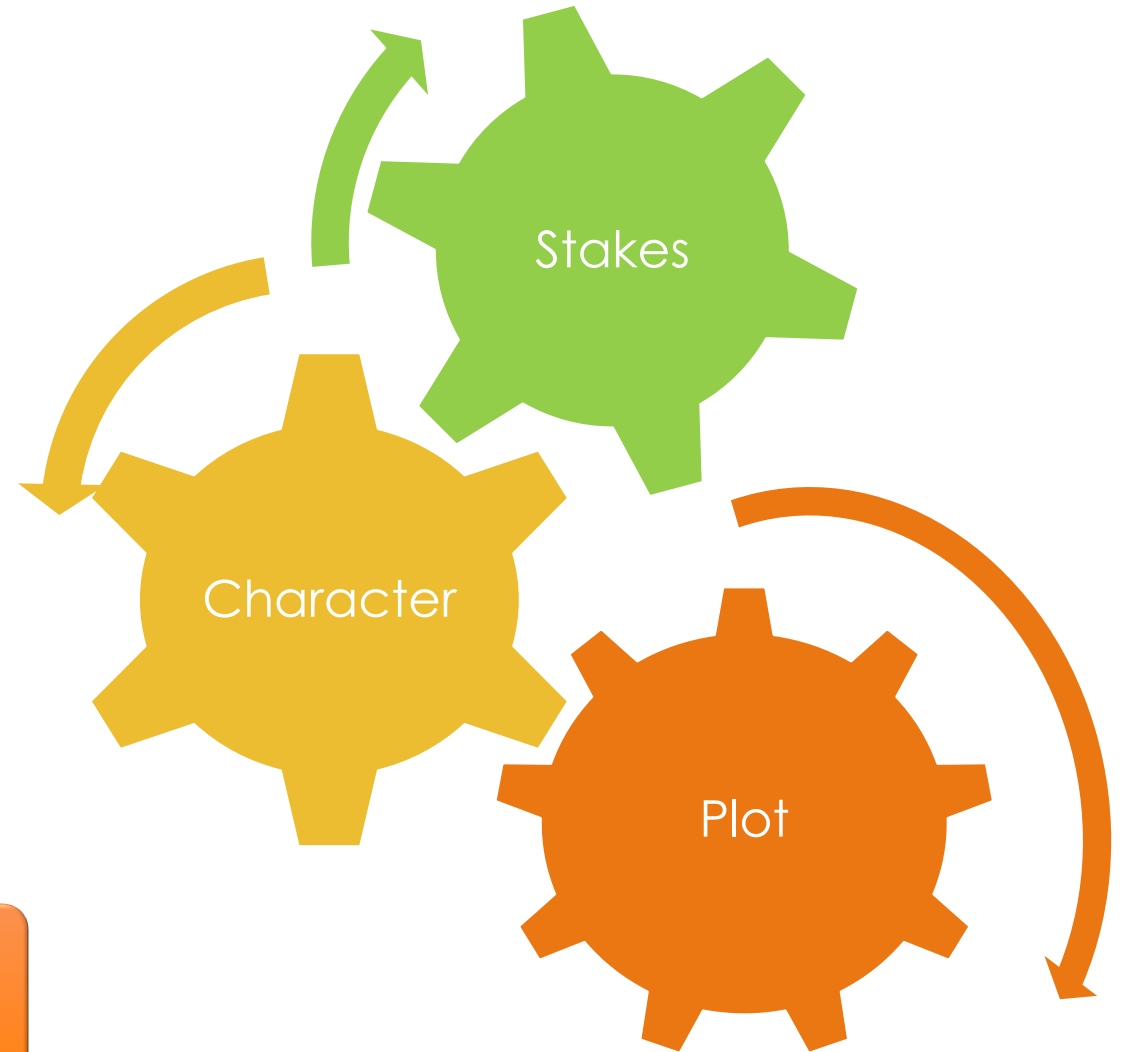
The **character takes action** in pursuit of a **strong, meaningful personal goal**.



Stakes drive the character

Character drives the plot

Plot shapes the character's arc





X is a \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_  
(key character descriptors) (identity/situation)

Point A →

who \_\_\_\_\_, but \_\_\_\_\_  
(goal/longing) (thing in the way)

But when \_\_\_\_\_,  
(new situation)

she must \_\_\_\_\_,  
(new response)

despite \_\_\_\_\_,  
(obstacle, fear, challenge)

and she learns \_\_\_\_\_  
(change from initial fears/wound)

→ Point B

Plot  
↑  
↓

# MOMENTUM



How do you hook readers right away?



What sets the main story in motion—and when?



Is it always moving forward?



Do the protagonist(s)' actions drive the plot?



Do you create levels? Highs and lows building to a climax, stakes grow more urgent/important?



Do you keep readers invested/engaged throughout?

# WHAT IS A HOOK?



**Engages the reader's interest and curiosity**



**Makes them want to know more**



**Creates a promise to be delivered on**





## HOW DO YOU SET THE HOOK?

- Intrigue and invest readers in character
- Create conflict, struggle, or unrest
- Set up compelling stakes
- Establish clear narrative perspective and voice
- Begin to set up the plot
- Clearly establish “point A”
- Bring the story world to life
- Create questions in readers’ minds
- Get—and keep—the story moving



# MOVE THE STORY FORWARD

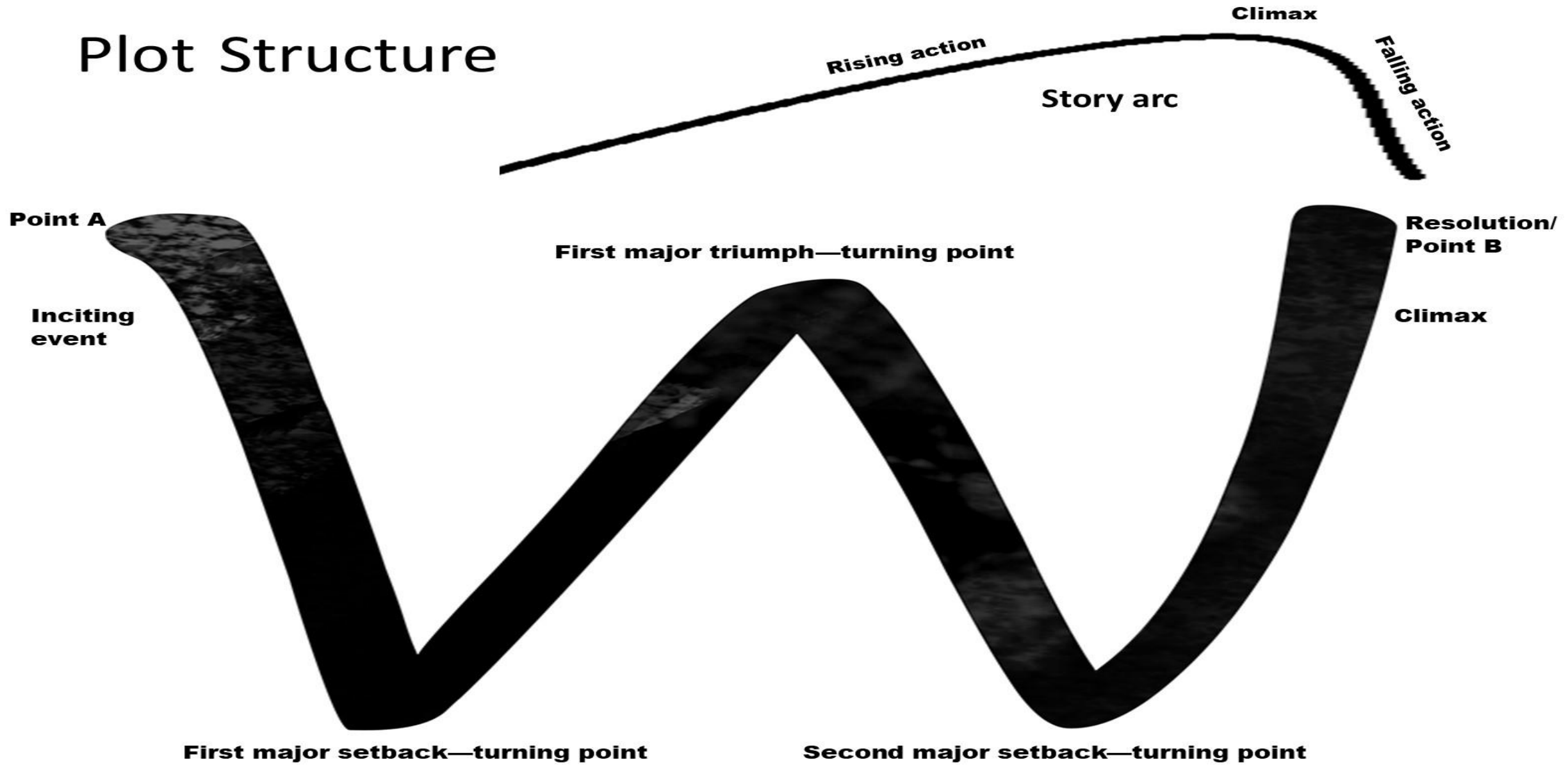
- Character creates/encounters an immediate **want** (in service of overarching want)
- Character takes **action** in pursuit of it (or refuses/fails to) and succeeds or fails in attaining immediate goal
- Character **shifts** to subsequent want: taking, adjusting, or changing the next necessary step toward ultimate goal

# CHARACTER AGENCY

How does your protag(s) **take action** in pursuit of what they want (or how does their refusal/inability/inaction **directly drive** the plot)



# Plot Structure



# DIAGNOSTIC TOOL: THE X-RAY

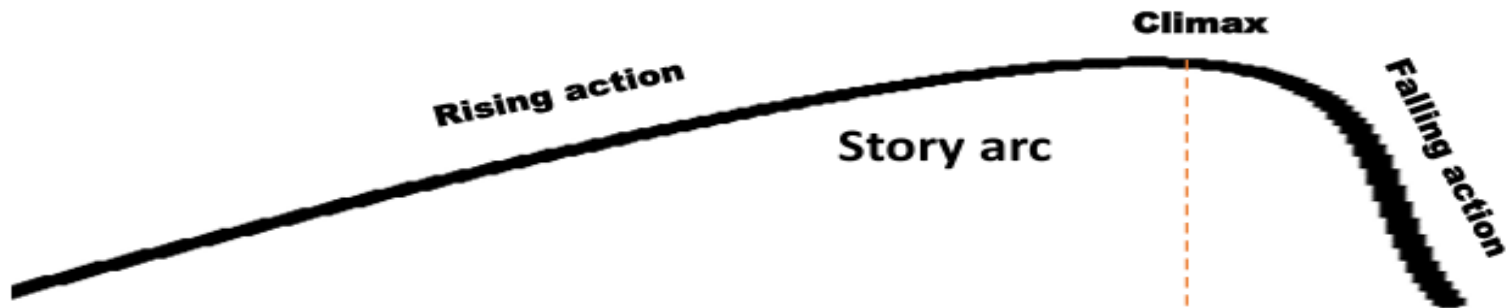


No more than a line or two summarizing each scene/event in the story

# X-RAY EXAMPLE: THE PRINCESS BRIDE

- A grandfather begins to read a story to his sick grandson
- Westley and Buttercup fall in love; he leaves to seek his fortune so they may marry
- Westley is killed by Dread Pirate Roberts; Buttercup will never love again
- Humperdinck chooses Buttercup as his bride; she does not love him
- Buttercup is accosted by three men and kidnapped; Gilder is framed for it.
- They are pursued by a mysterious ship. Buttercup jumps overboard—they retrieve her just before the shrieking eels attack
- The little boy is hooked; his grandfather reassures him, he feigns unconcern but exhorts him to read on.
- The Cliffs of Insanity; Fezzik climbs them all up while the man in black pursues.
- Vezzini takes Buttercup and the Giant and leaves swordsman Inigo to kill the man.
- Inigo waits for the man to recover and tells him of his vengeance mission. They fight a close duel; the man wins but leaves Inigo alive.
- The man faces the giant in a hard-fought battle of strength and wins. He leaves Fezzik alive and continues his pursuit.
- He faces off with Vezzini in a battle of wits and wins; he procures the princess.

# Plot Structure



**Setup:** Westley and Buttercup fall in love; Westley leaves and dies

**First major triumph—turning point:**

They make it through the Fire Swamp—BUT they are recaptured by Rugen

**Resolution:**

Reunited, perfect kiss

**Climax:**

“Drop your sword”

**All is lost:**

Buttercup is married and suicidal; Westley is helpless and missing; Inigo is gravely wounded

**Inciting event:**

Humperdinck chooses Buttercup

They battle dangers in the Fire Swamp

They flee Humperdinck

But it's Westley!

Buttercup fears the Dread Pirate Roberts has captured her

Man in Black defeats Vezzini

Man in Black defeats Fezzik

Man in Black defeats Inigo

Cliffs of Insanity

**First major setback—turning point:**

Buttercup is kidnapped—BUT they are pursued by a ship

**Second major setback—turning point:**

Humperdinck kills Westley—BUT Inigo and Fezzik miracle him back to life

# USING YOUR X-RAY



- Does it hold together? Are there plot holes?
- Check for causality/cohesion: “But/therefore.”
- Are bad/undesirable things happening to your protag(s)?
- Is there any easier or better way out of the mess? (The answer must be no.)
- Are there loose ends? Unanswered questions? Anything unresolved?
- Any unmotivated actions? Is it realistic? Believable? (Deus ex machina)



# SCENE LEVEL

# SCENES CONDUCT THE READER'S EXPERIENCE

Every scene should:

- Draw the reader in
- Move the story forward
- Make the reader want to turn the page



MAKE EVERY  
SCENE  
ESSENTIAL

Meaningfully  
advances the plot

Moves the character  
along their arc

Raises stakes

# IS IT ON THE PAGE?

Where  
and  
how  
do  
you...

Orient the reader to the scene, POV/perspective, and setting

Offer connective tissue between scenes/storylines

Show the character's intention/objective in the scene

Indicate their state of mind

Offer necessary context

Show character taking action toward immediate objective

Create questions, tension, uncertainty, obstacles

Show character reactions and response to success/failure

# MOMENTUM KILLERS

- Info dumps
- Background dumps
- Flashbacks
- Too much description
- Too much thought/inner dialogue
- Too much unbroken dialogue
- Too much stage direction
- Extraneous verbiage
- Detours (inessential plot developments, minor characters, etc.)



# OPENING (FIRST DRAFT)

## Chapter 1

There's nothing I hate more than a deviation from the plan. And tonight there's an intrusion of my own making. One that's caused me to bite my fingernails to the quick, starting the moment I invited my visitors, stipulating they were to come only after dark. Now I torture myself with the sanity of my own decision. Why should I do the right thing, if it puts our carefully ordered lives in danger—especially since I came so close to losing everything before?

A warm May breeze pushes through our bedroom window, laden with moisture and the promise of rain. However, I'm focused on the next task dictated by my all-important notebook. Standing beside our bed, I run my hand over the tan leather cover, the smooth surface interrupted only by the personalization of Carys Millbank embossed in gold. My notebook entries focus my racing mind and give me purpose. A life without a plan is a vast, meaningless forest without a sign indicating if you're on the right path.

# REVISED OPENING

## Chapter 1

It fits in the palm of my hand. For better and worse, the thirty little pills contained in this clear plastic cylinder promise to change my mood, my mind, and my ability to perform basic functions of life—eating, sleeping, even breathing. I shake a single pill out into my hand, caressing its smooth white surface. I glance at the glass of water on the kitchen counter, at the ready for our daily ritual—one that will end today. Before I talk myself out of it, again, I slip the pill into the front pocket of my jeans.

To my surprise, my disobedience feels good. After almost two years of faithfully following the agreement I'd made so they'd discharge me from the facility, I'm taking control of my own destiny. There is something ironic, though, about keeping this a secret from my husband. It's for him that I'm going cold turkey. He won't understand, but I hope he will soon enough.

# CHAPTER ONE—FIRST DRAFT

- Carys is nervously expecting unidentified visitors for an unknown reason (p. 1)
- She looks at the day's to-do list of chores in her notebook and starts packing her husband's suitcase for a family funeral trip as her son runs into the room and helps (pp. 2-3)
- Her husband comes home and they all catch up on their day (pp. 3-5)
- She goes to shower and she thinks about an unspecified book club last night and something unidentified that happened afterward (pp. 6-7)
- She washes dishes while her husband sits and works; she is impatient for him to leave. She feels unsafe in the house for an unidentified reason (p. 8)

# CHAPTER ONE— REVISED VERSION

- Holding her anxiety meds, Carys decides for the first time to stop taking them (graf 1)
- She's surprised it feels good to break the agreement she made in order to be discharged from a facility, taking charge of her own destiny. She's hiding it from her husband, though—even though she's doing it for him, though he won't understand that until later (graf 2)
- She considers her notebook: “My notebook entries—dates, lists, ruminations—focus my racing mind and give me purpose. A life without a plan is a vast, meaningless forest without a sign indicating if you're on the right path” (graf 3)
- Her new to-do list (graf 4):
  - Order new Star Wars Lego set
  - Email local stores for school auction donations
  - Write condolence card
  - Stop taking pills 😊
  - Don't act crazy
  - Be more social, easygoing
  - Prove I'm a good mother

# CHAPTER ONE— REVISED VERSION (CONTINUED)

- We learn she is trying to save her marriage (“I need to remind myself of my past failings and vow not to repeat them.”) She doesn’t see her son outside and panics for a moment till she spots him (p. 2)
- She lets the sight of her immaculate house soothe her, as “Dr. Ingram” taught her. A shadow and a hand on her neck terrify her until she realizes it’s her husband; he’s concerned at her reaction (pp. 3-4)
- He encourages her to attend a book club meeting tonight of wives of employees of his company; she is hesitant, remembering storming into the company holiday party last year in pajamas and sobbing, accusing him baselessly of cheating with his assistant (pp. 5-6)
- We learn their marriage has been rocky since; her MIL wants her out of his life, and Carys feels she has to prove she can be the “corporate wife” he wants and agrees to go. He notices her pill bottle and she lies and she lies about taking her meds (pp. 6-7)
- Their son comes in and when he learns she’s going out with friends, he says, “You have friends?” Her husband leaves to shower, kissing her on the forehead, which worries her again about their dynamic and strengthens her resolve to fix the marriage. (pp. 8-9)
- Last graf: “I know I was right to stop taking the pills. I already feel more alive and like I can trust my intuitions are my own. Whether that’s a good thing remains to be seen.” (p. 9)

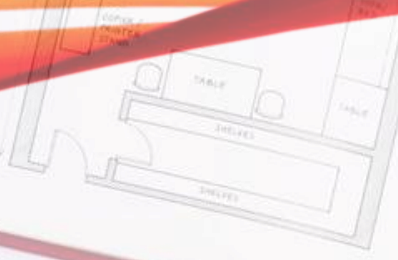
# LIVE EDITS





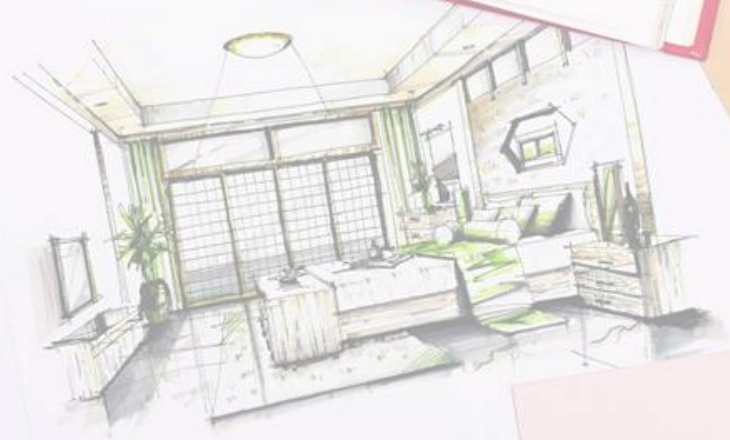
ing area is arranged. Bookshelves are contained within a triangle... The room area is partitioned out for storage of equipment, files and stationery.

Scale 1/8" = 1'-0"



### DESIGN DECISIONS

- 1 **Scheme** White walls and beige flooring combine to form the background to modern black furnishings in this loft space. A very minimalist scheme, relieved only by a scattering of brightly colored chair cushions.
- 2 **Desks** These are of a good size and have additional pull-out surfaces. Faced with laminate, they are tough and easily cleaned.
- 3 **Bookshelves** A case of a storage problem becoming a decorative feature: the triangular shape of the recess adds interest to a featureless wall.
- 4 **Seating** In the writing area, a day bed has been formed by placing a foam mattress on a solid base. A bolster and numerous other cushions give the bed its day-time dimension.
- 5 **Lighting** Large black Anglepoise lamps are of an appropriate style to go with the scheme and to direct light exactly where needed. Table lamps would be a suitable choice in a more dramatic style of office. Natural light from double windows and a skylight floods the room.
- 6 **Flooring** A low-pile corded carpet is suitably robust to stand up to chair casters and heavy usage.



### BEDROOM CHECKLIST:

- Bed
- Nighstand (x2)
- Bedside lighting (x2)
- Rug
- Dresser
- Mirror
- Overhead lighting
- Window coverings
- Art
- Decor
- Armchair
- Bench/Ottomans

# LINE LEVEL



# TRIMMING THE FAT

---

Clutter

---

Redundancy

---

Overusing descriptors

---

Dialogue attributions

---

Telegraphing

---

Dangling/misplaced modifiers

# CLUTTER

The spoon slipped from his fingers, tumbling through the air in a slow, graceful arc before landing with a dull clatter against the edge of the porcelain plate. A tremor ran through the silverware, the vibration echoing in the quiet kitchen like the last note of a fading symphony.

## **Cleaner:**

The spoon clattered to the plate.

# CLUTTER

Leaving the meeting, Jim was in the backseat on his return trip. The box was resting in his lap, but he was staring out of the window of the vehicle, thinking about the events of the meeting. He nodded his head. I need to move fast, he decided firmly.

## **Cleaner:**

In the car afterward Jim stared out the backseat window, clutching the box and dissecting the meeting. He nodded. *I need to move fast.*

# REDUNDANCY

- Sarah was nervous because she was about to go onstage for the first time, and she didn't like being the center of attention. Her legs shook as if carrying the weight of all those eyes on her.
- Will nodded. "There was no doubt about that." He gave Palmer a look that told him there was no doubt about the information. [Published by a Big Five house]
- Everything below him lay in sharp, well-defined light.
- She turned her back on him and walked to the back of the room, determined never to go back to the way things were.
- "I don't think so," I said flatly, no intonation in my voice.
- Suddenly, without warning, she yelled, "Watch out!"

# OVERUSING DESCRIPTORS

- “No, thanks,” he said softly, touching his husband on the arm affectionately.
- A slow, sexy grin inched its way along his strong, stubbled jaw.

Watch in dialogue tags especially:

“Will you help me?” she asked nervously.

“Sure,” he immediately replied.

“Okay, then,” she said gratefully.

# DIALOGUE ATTRIBUTIONS

- **Don't use it if you don't need it:**

“Hi, Mark, you old sod,” I greeted my friend.

“Belinda! You're looking cheery,” Mark said.

- **Don't overdo it:**

“I see you came here too,” I said.

“I did,” she answered.

“Why?” I asked.

She responded, “Where else am I going to go?”

- **Don't get fancy:**

“Oh, no!” she wailed.

“Yes!” he exclaimed.

“Please go,” she snarled angrily.

“Gladly,” he sneered.

# TELEGRAPHING

## Stealing your own thunder:

- He told her how everything fell apart: “Ralph and Laura came over and . . .”
- The unexplained delay would be followed by a stunning reversal of roles....
- A mistake. Most often, when I ignore my instincts, I pay for it. That night was no exception....

## DANGLING OR MISPLACED MODIFIERS

**Modifier words used in the wrong place or too far away from what they modify:**

- Exhausted, her lips pulled down in a frown.
- Walking along the sidewalk, her long hair streamed behind her in the breeze.
- Lying abandoned on the floor was a giant baby's rattle.



# ADDING THE FLAVOR

---

Clear and specific

---

Accurate and exact

---

Visual/visceral

---

Effective/efficient/economical  
(serves the story, multitasks)

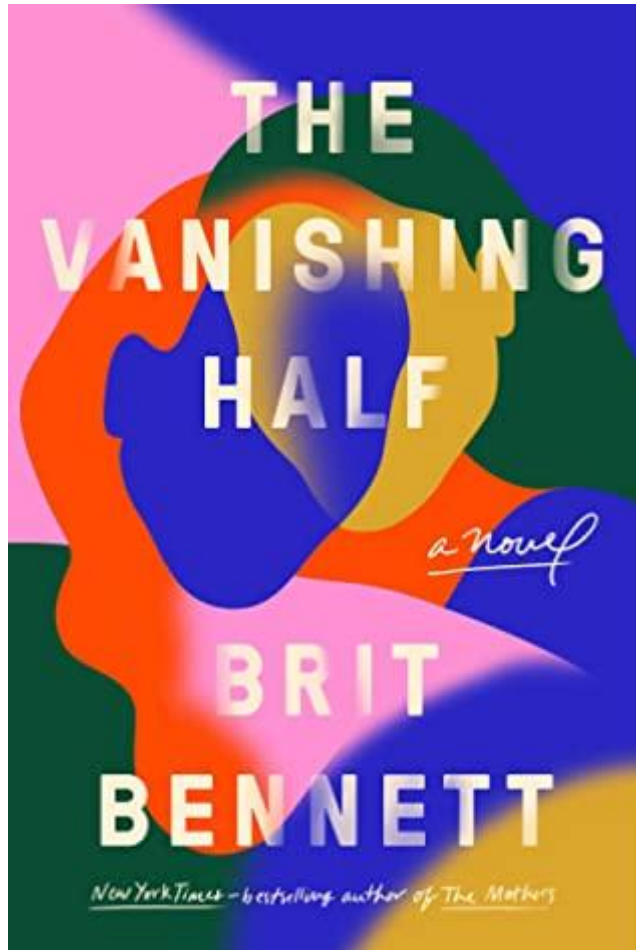
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Original



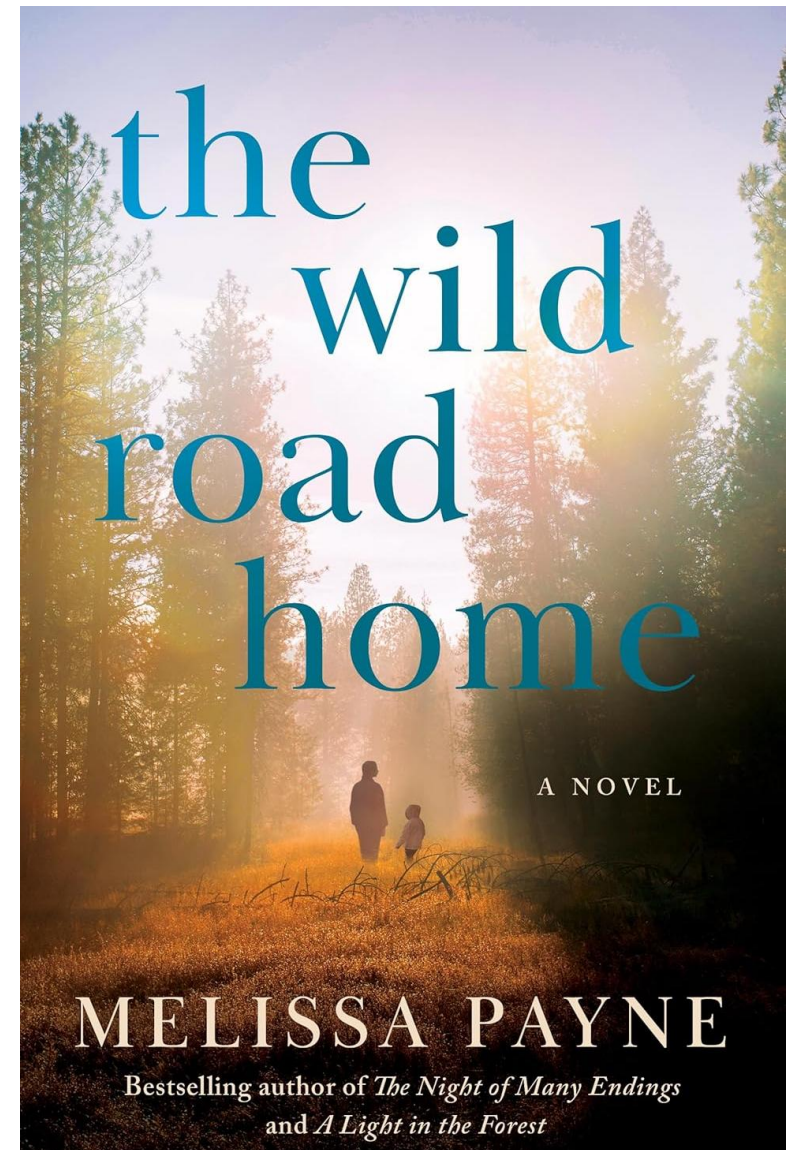
# EXAMPLE

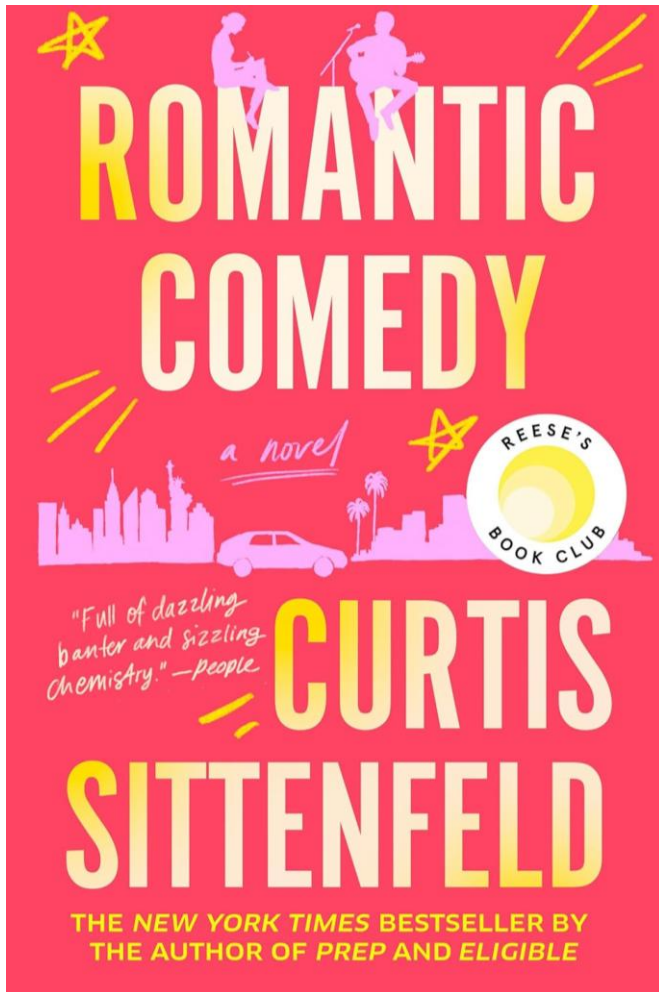
She hated growing up in the small town where her family had always lived, where everyone was obsessed with skin color, which felt pointless to her.



She didn't hate Mallard as much as she felt trapped by its smallness. She'd trampled the same dirt roads her entire life; she'd carved her initials on the bottom of school desks that her mother had once used, and that her children would someday, feeling her jagged scratching with their fingers. And the school was in the same building it'd always been, all the grades together, so that even moving up to Mallard High hadn't felt like a progression at all, just a step across the hallway. Maybe she would have been able to endure all this if it weren't for everyone's obsession with lightness. Syl Guillory and Jack Richard arguing in the barber shop about whose wife was fairer, or her mother yelling after her to always wear a hat, or people believing ridiculous things, like drinking coffee or eating chocolate while pregnant might turn a baby dark. Her father had been so light that, on a cold morning, she could turn his arm over to see the blue of his veins. But none of that mattered when the white men came for him, so how could she care about lightness after that?

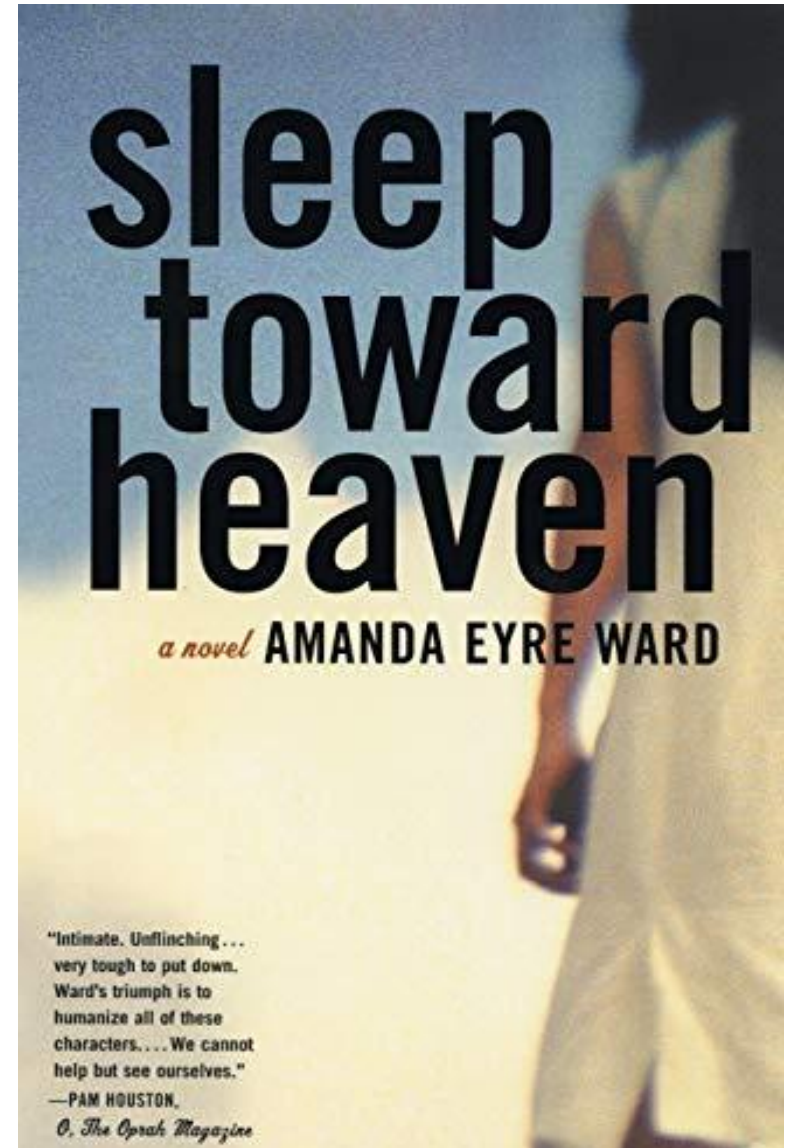
- He didn't mind her chatter. In the silence of the past few months, his mistakes had grown mouths. Brandi kept the noise at bay.
- Silence spread like an inkstain.
- She hardly kept anything inside, like her thoughts were pets she kept on a leash, bounding around her.



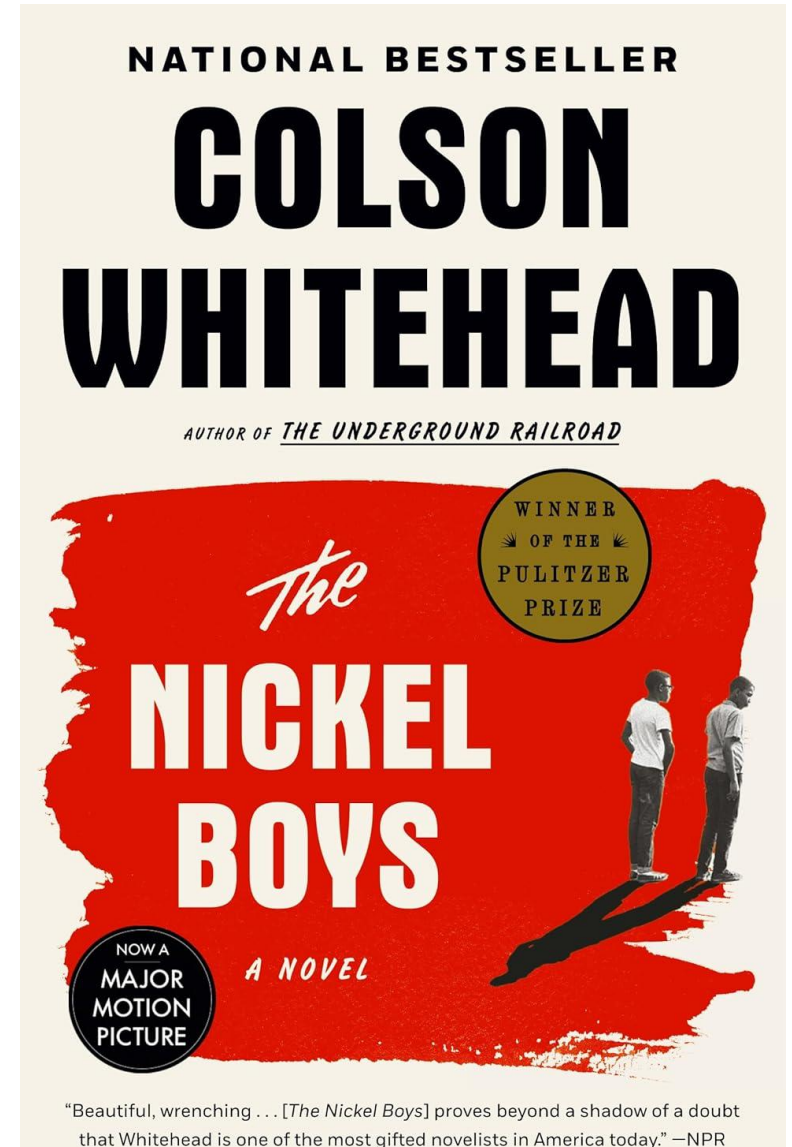


And then there was just the sheer physical pleasure and excitement of my mouth touching his mouth and the skin on my hands and arms and face and neck touching the skin on his hands and arms and face and neck and the rest of my clothed body pressed to the rest of his clothed body. It felt like a relief, like something I'd been waiting for since *TNO* and much of the world had shut down in March, and also like something I'd been waiting for since he'd shown me his tattoos in 2018, and also like something I've been waiting for my whole life. *And* it felt like an astonishing miracle. If this was all I ever got, it would be the best thing that ever happened to me, and if this was all I ever got, I'd never stop wanting more of it.

He heaved off her, watched her put her hand into her pocket. She kicked him in the groin as hard as she could, her bony knee in the softest flesh. He cried out, loosened his hold on the gun, and she grabbed it. She shot him in the face, she shot him in the heart. It was too much. It was enough. She shot him again and again and then she took the ring from his finger and she ran.



Maynard Spencer was a white man in his late 50s, bits of silver in his cropped black hair. A real “crack of dawner,” as Harriet used to say, who moved with a deliberate air, as if he rehearsed everything in front of a mirror. He had a narrow raccoon face that drew Ellwood's attention to his tiny nose and dark circles under his eyes and thick bristly eyebrows. Spencer was fastidious with his dark blue Nickel uniform; every crease in his clothes looked sharp enough to cut, as if he were a living blade.





# GETTING FEEDBACK

What to expect when  
you're expecting  
(critique)

# SOURCES OF FEEDBACK

## **Useful:**

- Lay readers
- Other authors
- Book coaches
- Professionals (editors, agents)

## **Less useful:**

- Friends and family
- Your mama

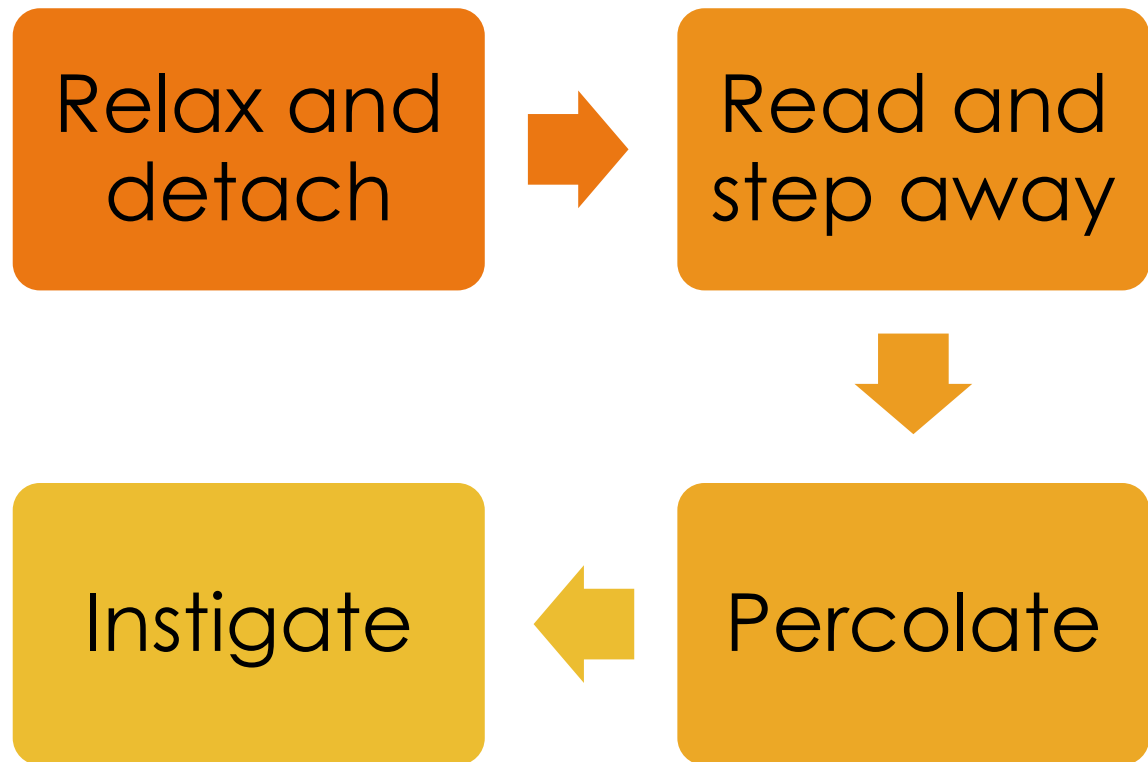


# FEEDBACK TIPS

- Know when you're ready
- Select appropriate readers
- Limit the number
- Ask for what you want—offer guidelines:
  - Specific areas of concern
  - Clear questions/parameters
  - Tone/type of input
- Be clear about your timeline (but respectful of reader's time)
- Be grateful and appreciative!



# TAKING IT IN



# PUTTING IT ON THE PAGE



- Critique/feedback is “how to find it”—identify core of issue (i.e., character, stakes, suspense, etc.)
- Feedback suggests *what* needs addressing; you determine *how*
- Know how to filter feedback for *your* vision
- Play “what-if”—be ridiculous
- Find a sounding board (different from source)
- Home in and develop
- Incorporate (revision--“how to fix it”)



"There is a difference between a book of two hundred pages from the very beginning, and a book of two hundred pages which is the result of an original eight hundred pages. The six hundred are there. Only you don't see them."

—Elie Wiesel

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