

**“How to write a novel that is either super-commercial,
or the other extreme, without any regard for the market,
about your passion for the topic”**

by Guest Speaker, John Hill

Long-time LVWG member John Hill is a veteran Hollywood writer. Among his many credits are the Tom Selleck movie “Quigley Down Under” and writing for “LA Law” (won an Emmy for that one) and the “Quantum Leap” TV series. He teaches screen-writing at UNLV and is currently working on a novel.

John began his presentation by postulating that most genre novelists get started by reading a particular genre that they like until they reach an understanding of its structure. When they decide to write in that genre themselves, they have a choice to make: either write a novel about a personal area of interest that ignores the marketplace, or write a novel that is calculated to be a break-out blockbuster best-seller. John then presented six steps for turning any topic or subject into a basic plot regardless of which direction you choose. (See attachment for additional details.)

1. The subject you care about is _____.
2. The best tone (or genre?) you might best write this in, is: _____.
(Hint: write a book about ice fishing, no one cares; write a murder mystery set in the world of ice fishing, there's millions of potential readers.)
3. Choose a protagonist (gender, personality type, occupation) _____
that is an advocate or somehow stands for your subject/topic #1 above.)
4. Decide your hero's goal concerning what they are advocating you want to write about.
5. This one is the unique concept of this drill; things in opposition = conflict, and conflict is the essence of all novels. So what is the opposite of your above topic #1 _____ ?
6. Who is your villain? Who exists to block your hero's goal concerning your topic #1 above, by advocating and working towards the opposite of your protagonist's goal, which is #5 above?

John explained that things in opposition equal conflict and conflict is the essence of all good story-telling. Answering these six questions provides a would-be writer with a core plot and story for any subject. A protagonist stands for that subject and has a goal but is blocked by a villain with an opposite goal.

Writing a story of personal interest is one choice a writer can make once he or she has a basic plot, protagonist and antagonist identified. Writing a best-selling blockbuster with instant movie potential is another choice. “There is a pattern for first time novelists breaking onto the New York Times best-seller list,” he said. “Big, imaginative and simple plots. High-concept stories.”

Before listing some examples, John related a conversation he had with a publisher back in the 1970's. He asked her, "What is the best idea for a novel?" and she answered, "Anything that can be made into a movie." This was a turning point in John's understanding of how to make it in the publishing world. "But keeping it simple," he warned, "is the hardest part for new writers."

He related a quote the novelist and screenwriter William Goldman once said about blockbuster movies. "When one person can yell the plot across a parking lot to another person, you know you've got a hit." He cited "Snakes on a Plane" as a recent example. Someone in the audience mentioned the newly released movie "Zombieland" as another example.

"A high-concept idea for a novel is similar. It needs to be one that can be expressed in 25 words or less, sound fantastically compelling and must-buy-and-read-now to its target audience while acknowledging and solving the publisher's marketing and advertising challenges." With that in mind, he listed a few examples including "Jurassic Park" (dinosaurs are brought back to life from DNA, get loose and eat people), and "Indecent Proposal" (a broke yuppie couple must decide if the wife should spend the night with a billionaire for one million dollars).

"If that's the kind of success you want to have, you have to think of a fun, escapist ride that will sell in airports. Go big and think big. Get creative. Laugh at the ridiculousness of your ideas. With humor your mind will go places it normally does not. Humor gives us permission to think outside of our social constructs. "

Several well-known authors today broke onto the New York Times best-seller list with their first novels by following this advice. He cited Peter Benchley with "Jaws," Stephen King with "Carrie," Michael Crichton with "The Andromeda Strain," and most recently Dan Brown with "The Da Vinci Code." Although John took some exception with Dan Brown's writing, he acknowledged that because of the high concept story involving descendants of Jesus, Dan Brown has gone onto a successful writing career despite not being a very good writer.

"I'm not advocating sloppy writing," John concluded before opening the floor to questions, "but there's always a market for big, crazy ideas."

Next month's speaker will be another long-time LVWG member, Jay MacLarty on "How to Finish What You Start."

Notes by LVWG Scribe Eric J. Miller

HOW TO WRITE A NOVEL THAT IS EITHER SUPER-COMMERCIAL, OR THE OTHER EXTREME, WITHOUT ANY REGARD FOR THE MARKET, BUT ABOUT YOUR PASSION FOR THE TOPIC - by John Hill. Oct. 15, 2009. © John Hill 2009

It is my experience that most would-be novelists generally write in the genre they're familiar with, so they kind of stay in the middle of any extremes about conscious commercialism. But I want to talk tonight about going to either extreme, writing a novel that completely ignores the commercial marketplace, but you're want to write out of your passion for a particular area. OR, the other extreme, you want to scheme out and write a novel that is calculated to try to be a break-out, blockbuster best-seller. First, how to take literally any topic or area you care about and want to write a novel about, but aren't sure how to come up with a plot for it. I'll show you some quick steps, a drill, that gives you a plot. But remember, you'll just be rationalizing any commercial marketplace for it, since you're writing what you want to want to write, for you. Here's how to turn literally any topic into a core plot for a novel, and I mean literally any topic: world peace, crab grass, the Brooklyn Bridge, anything you want to write about. **Here are 6 steps, in this order: how to turn any topic or subject you want to write about into a basic plot:**

1. The subject you care about is _____. 2. The best tone (or genre?) you might best write this is in, is: _____. (Hint: write a book about ice fishing, no one cares; write a murder mystery set in the world of ice fishing, there's millions of potential readers.) 3. Choose a protagonist (gender, personality type, occupation) _____ and this hero/heroine is an advocate or somehow stands for your subject/topic #1 above you care about. 4. Decide your hero's goal concerning what they are advocating you want to write about. 5. This one is the unique concept of this drill; things in opposition = conflict, and conflict is the essence of all novels. So what is the opposite of your above topic #1? _____ (Answer this, no matter how silly or Zen it sounds. The opposite of ice fishing? A law against ice fishing. Or someone who kills ice fishermen, whatever. Opposite of world peace? A pro-war arms dealer. But you must answer this question, what's the opposite of whatever you want to write about. 6. Who is your villain? Who exists to block your hero's goal concerning your topic #1 above, by advocating and working towards the opposite of your protagonist's goal, which is #5 above? And that's it. Put this all together and you have a core plot/story based on what you want to write about. A protagonist who stands for/advocates your chosen area of interest has a goal, but is blocked by a villain with the opposite goal for your subject area. Now you have a basic, core plot for what you care to write about, which, remember, may have nothing to do with any commercial, market considerations.

Next, the opposite: what if you decide to set out to score big-time and write a blockbuster/best-selling novel? How would go about trying to do that? Especially if you're a nervous novice? First, forget both nervous and novice. There have been many best-sellers written by first-time novelists, and there's a pattern. The pattern of success in this area is called a "high concept" plot. The criteria for these is that they are **BIG, IMAGINATIVE, but SIMPLE**. Simple is the hardest for newer writers.

High concept is a Hollywood movie marketing term, a short hand for "high profile" (obvious) conflict" that then changed publishing forever some years ago. The need for high concept plots is simply that in our over-cluttered culture, it will stand out. You want a plot comparable that in Hollywood movie terms to SNAKES ON A PLANE. Anyone who doesn't know the plot for SNAKES ON A PLANE, it is snakes on a plane. **Big, Imaginative, but simple.** Instantly "gettable" - and also "want-able" by many people. But we're talking novels here. What is "high concept"? It's an OH-WOW plot. ~ ~ **A "high concept" idea for a novel (or script) is one that can be expressed in (literally!) 25 words or less and have it sound FANTASTICALLY COMPELLING and MUST-BUY-AND-READ-NOW to its target audience and implicitly acknowledges and solves the publisher's marketing and advertising challenges. ~ ~**

In other words, a plot, that *at a glance* at the paperback cover or inside jacket copy, SELLS ITSELF. "DNA-engineered dinosaurs are brought back to life on an island park, get loose, eat people." (JURASSIC PARK). "Young, broke, desperate yuppie couple must decide if the pretty wife should spend the night with a billionaire -- for one million dollars." (INDECENT PROPOSAL). "Lawyer joins law firm then is told by FBI he'll be arrested since it is Mafia-owned, but Mafia will kill him if he quits." (THE FIRM). But you're still back on, wait, I don't have the confidence yet to write any novel, and you're telling me I should try for a best-seller? No, I'm only telling you it's much more possible and within your reach than you think, and it IS a viable choice to try. Can it really happen to a first-timer? Yes. Peter Benchley. JAWS. A water-phobic, small island community sheriff goes out in a too-small boat to kill a 25-foot great white shark or die trying. Stephen King's 1st novel. CARRIE. Shy, bullied high school girl, who has telekinesis, is elevated to prom queen, is humiliated, traumatized, gets violent revenge with her ESP. Michael Crichton's 1st: THE ANDROMEDA STRAIN. What if a deadly space virus arrived in Arizona and 5 scientists in an underground lab had 48 hours to stop it? William Peter Blatty's 1st: THE EXORCIST. 12-year-old girl is actually possessed by the Devil, so her mother and two priests must try to save her. What about today? Well, imagine you're a New York literary agent. Which plot in a letter of query would you prefer to get? "This is a romance novel about a dairy maid and a dashing pirate with eyes the color of a storm-tossed sea" and the agent thinks, IF I work hard and IF this sells, my 10% commission is \$150. Or do they want to get a plot in a letter of query that says "Ebola-type virus breaks out on a 747 leaving London - pilot discovers no country will let them land, as jets scramble to shoot 747 down." (J.A.Nance's 1st novel, THE DOOMSDAY FLIGHT.) Agent commission could end up being, with movie rights, hundreds of thousands of \$\$\$.

What I'm proposing flies in the face of the usual assumptions that you have to crawl for years before you walk, and I am suggesting you could think big and really go for it now. It is the same number of 360 pages and rearranging the same 26 letters of the alphabet to try to either the \$1,500 advance for a first novel, or \$1 million advance plus movie rights. This is not our goal, but a fantastically commercial plot can transcend poor writing quality, i.e., THE DA VINCI CODE by Dan Brown. But his high concept plot was commercially brilliant: "What if Jesus Christ had a child with Mary Magdalene and a secret religious order has been tracking descendants to this day?" Or MEG, a novel by first-timer Steve Alton. "What if a 80-foot-long prehistoric shark, a megladon, had survived to this day, then surfaced from ocean floor, ready for supper?" \$1.9 million for JAWS meet JURASSIC PARK. To try for high concept plots, own that you must finally use your full imagination. Think outside the box the box came in. Be wild, be silly, get big crazy ideas, laugh -- then reflect, why not? Big, imaginative, simple. It is an option.