

How to Write a Novel

LESSON 15



Writing Meaningful Fiction: Mastering Theme, Allegory, & Subtext HOLLY LISLE

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Intro

You can't sell what you don't own.

And you may be thinking, "I'm a writer. I just want to write. I don't want to *sell* anything."

Or, "I just want to think about writing the book right now. I'll worry about selling it later."

But neither of those is the kind of selling I'm talking about.

You have a story you want to tell, and in that story, you want to make the reader believe your characters could be real people doing real things...

And to get your reader to believe in your characters, in your story, in what matters to you so much that you've turned it into a novel, you have to first believe what you're doing.

And then you have to sell your belief.

You have to sell the reality of your characters, of your story, of your world and your theme and the whole reason you're telling THIS story instead of some other story, and you have to do it one reader at a time, showing the reader why the story you're telling matters.

Not just to you. To him, to her.

To do that, you have to know what matters. And own that. And sell that.

Onward.

Theme. Allegory. Subtext.

You are more than the sum of your parts.

You boil any human being down to component chemicals, and get several bucks worth of chemicals.

But chemicals are not what human beings are. We are more than the sum of our parts, more than simple organisms, more than even we can truly comprehend.

We are creatures that — understanding our own impermanence — do not despair, but rather aspire to make our lives matter.

That is the basic reason you're here, taking this class right now.

At bare minimum, you're looking for the way to create something that will allow you to make sense of who you are. Taking the step above that, you're looking to create something that will connect with at least one other person. And the single step of from that is embracing the reality that you're learning to speak across time and space through the only telepathy we've ever discovered — to figure out what you have to say that matters across the days, the years, and the centuries.

You are working to outlive yourself. To create your own immortality, even if you won't be around to see it.

So what do you have to say that matters to you?

Toss out any idea of:

- Changing the world
- Saving the world

- Designing a working utopia for the future to build based on your plans

The books from our own past that set out to “save the future” are outdated, unworkable, or painfully awful. Frequently all three.

The works from the past that remain true, inarguable, utterly relevant are small-scale and human:

- **Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales***, written about six hundred twenty-five years ago, which shows a mixed group of travelers who are as recognizable today as they were when he wrote them. They’re telling dirty jokes, or being pious and stuck up, carrying their little dogs around under their arms, trying to show how brave they are, or what a jerk the other guy is. You KNOW these folks in this world today, though they have different names and different jobs.
- **Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew***, written about four-hundred thirty years ago, which is such a universally understandable demonstration of a relationship between a man and a woman that you can stage it in the present day with contemporary settings and actors, and it still works.
- **Mark Twain’s *The Death of Jean***, written one hundred nine years ago as I write this, which transcends time and space to show the humanity of love and loss — when a father who loses his daughter gives us his pain and his love of her raw on the page.

Two of these are funny, one makes me cry to this day, and all three remain relevant in showing us who humans were, and who we remain.

They are honest. Naked. True.

And you have within you the seeds you need to grow works that — like these — can withstand the ravages of time, and remain true for centuries.

You can't guarantee that you'll join the immortals of literature, of course. History picks its long-game winners from a huge pool of contenders, and all the rest disappear.

But you can swing for the fences. You can give your run for immortality your very best shot. Here's how:

Start by defining your story's theme.

You figure this out by asking the question: **Why do I care about this story?**

And with each answer you give, you ask "why" again.

I'll demo this with *Dead Man's Party*.

- **Why do I care about this story?**

Because I'm looking at a direction science is taking with humanity in which I see the *enslavement by technology* of nearly everyone to the few who grab power?

- **Why do I care about enslavement by technology?**

Because I see that at the start it can be made attractive, compelling, made to look promising and delightful, so that *huge numbers of ordinary people* will see only the fun, but will not see the hook buried inside of it.

- **Why do I care what happens to huge numbers of ordinary people?**

Because I am an ordinary person, without power or government pull, and *my freedom and life matter greatly to me*.

At this point, I have stripped off the window dressing of my novel and have discovered the small core of personal truth that is the reason I'm writing the book. *My freedom and life matter greatly to me.*

The problem my characters face is a world-spanning problem. Most of humanity will be involved if the villain succeeds in the first step of his plan — the eradication of the people who would recognize what he was doing.

BUT... No part of this story is about the whole world.

It's about something that matters to a four individual people, and all of those people lived through something terrible that came to an end ten years earlier — a massive abuse of power that enslaved the world.

So, keeping this personal, and keeping it small, I'm telling the story of three people who were nearly destroyed by the fourth. Who survived, and who are now risking their own lives and everything they hold dear to protect the rest of humanity from the my villain — the one who had enslaved everyone the first time, and has figured out a way to do it again, this time without anyone or anything who might stop him.

So...

- **What is my theme?**

That the protection and preservation of individual human rights are the most important work people can engage in.

Told at a large scale, this would be a deadly dull theme, full of preachiness and grandstanding, which would TELL the reader what he was supposed to think and feel.

Told through the eyes of the four people closest to the problem, it skips the preachiness, the grandstanding, the TELLING.

It just shows who these four people are, how they came to be those people, what they have to do to win or lose their own individual freedom — and what’s in it for them. What they get out of doing something that other people would pretend wasn’t a problem, would look the other way to avoid, would run from, rather than running toward.

By being small, close to the problem, and deeply tied to each of the four characters gets out of what happens next, I keep what’s at stake personal. Understandable.

Billions of people stand to lose everything if my heroes lose, if my villain wins.

BUT...

We as human beings are incapable of comprehending “billions” at a personal level. Or even thousands, or hundreds.

We understand loss only to the extent that we have experienced it directly. Not the loss of a city, but the loss of our friend who lived there. Not the massacre of thousands, but the death of our one loved one who was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

We understand the hurts we’ve lived through, and can extrapolate similar losses from those.

We care about what we know.

A billion strangers dead on the other side of the planet is a five-minute news headline. We experience a moment of “that’s awful,” and then get back to what we were doing.

The sudden death of the one person we love most on the planet is pain and regret and loss for the rest of our lives, an ache that catches us unawares, like a step on the stairs that’s suddenly broken. Every time we manage to forget about it, we trip and remember it all over again.

Some Demos

So let me run you through the process of doing this for different genres. I'll use the genres I've written in, because then I'm not just Making Things Up. I can offer some solid examples.

[Fire in the Mist](#) — Fantasy, my first novel that sold (to Baen), my second finished novel.

- **Why did I care about this story?**

Because the MC is a young woman who loses everyone she loves all at once, and at the time I wrote this, it was an unrealized fear that haunted me.

- **Why did I care about the possibility of mass loss?**

Because throughout my childhood, it was the theme of my life. Every year we moved or I changed schools, and every year I had to make new friends, and start all over again from almost no one, and almost nothing. We left my grandparents behind, my cousins, towns I loved, the state where I actually fit in. (When I was a few years into my pro writing career, I got the big-stakes version of this when my folks moved out of town without even saying goodbye to their grandkids or me, or letting us know they were leaving.)

- **Why did I care what happened to a made-up character who experienced this loss?**

Because by telling her story, I walked my way through understanding how I might deal with the sure knowledge that someday I would lose people more important to me than childhood school friends.

- **What was my theme?**

That life can and will pound you to pieces, hurt you, break you, destroy people who matter to you, take them away and never bring them back... and that in spite of the pain, in spite of the loss, you don't lie down. You don't give up. You just keep going.

[Midnight Rain](#) — the first of four paranormal suspense novels I wrote for HarperCollins.

- **Why did I care about this story?**

Because the female MC had been nearly destroyed by a stalker ex — and I had that nightmare first ex in my past, whose folks showed up one day at the kids' bus stop... six hundred miles and two states away from where they lived, in the place we were hiding, and tried to talk the kids — just getting off the bus about a block from our home — into getting into the car with them. Both kids ran home, told me what had happened, and when my ex-in-laws drove up, I stood in my doorway, my heart racing, shaking, and yelled out at them to leave, not knowing if they would.

Phoebe felt hunted, and even as I wrote this book some years later, the kids and I still felt hunted.

- **Why did I fear being hunted?**

Because, especially after that attempted grab at the bus stop, I did not know if I would be able to get between the hunters and my kids in any situation they might throw at me.

- **Why did I care what happened to a made-up character who experienced this loss?**

Because she'd risked her own life and had taken a literal bullet to put herself between a killer and the kids whose lives had been entrusted to her.

- **What was my theme?**

Never quit, never give up, never assume that everything is okay until you have proof that everything is okay... and you have to see the proof yourself.

One more demo, this current: [*The Longview Chronicles*](#). The entire 6-book series.

- **Why do I care about this story?**

Because I'm watching a slow, insidious, piecemeal destruction of freedom by erosion of both laws and language (if you destroy the meaning of words, you destroy the ability of people to express concepts necessary to their survival. Orwell's *1984* was a thoughtful take on this reality).

In my real world, I'm watching people who have much more in common than they realize deciding to hate each other — watching the “divide and conquer” strategy of ancient Rome modernized for today. I care because I plan to live on this planet for, if I'm very lucky, another 40 or 50 years, and I don't want to spend any portion of that life in either real or virtual slavery.

- **Why do I fear the broad loss of individual rights?**

Because I'm watching the creation of classes of people it is acceptable to hate — and because I know history, I know how that turns out. Right now in a lot of places, it's becoming acceptable to hate Christians because they're Christians, or conservatives because they're conservative. The fact that I'm an individualist-libertarian atheist does not mean I can look at this and say, “Hey, it's not me they're after.” Or that it's okay to be a little gleeful that the people who made my childhood and early adulthood miserable are now seeing the pendulum swing toward them.

Instead, it means that I'm the person who NEEDS to speak out, and do it now — because innocence matters, and individual human beings matter, and if I decide that people who are unlike me can be left unchampioned, the day will come when I'll be the person alone with no one left to speak for me.

- **Why do I care what happens to a universe full of made-up characters who have been quietly enslaved by their “caring government”?**

Because they are my metaphor for the worst of what I see in my own reality, in my own time. And my characters' futures are small extrapolations based on what I see my own government and governments around the world doing, as the world swings away from upholding the rights of the individual, and disguises gradual “frog in a pot of water” erosion of those rights. Working under the guise of taking from the rich to give to the poor, it enslaves both.

- **What is my theme?**

If we do not hang together — every gender, every race, every religion, every philosophy — and protect each other's rights and lives, we shall surely all hang separately. (Paraphrased from Thomas Paine) And... “My country is the world, and my religion is to do good.” - [Thomas Paine](#)

From my four examples, you can see that while I have started in a lot of different places, I have some themes that matter greatly to me. These are themes that I return to in different ways with different stories.

My life, from my experiences in youngest childhood through right this moment and today, have shaped the way I see the world, have put me in places where I could see real live examples of “worst-case” lives and the governments and policies that created them, and have made me care

deeply about finding ways to help people live their own best lives — while seeing how quickly their freedom to do that could dissolve.

Your life and your experiences have shaped you, and while the odds are decent that you haven't spent part of your life in the middle of a civil war, or a communist (and anti-American) incursion, or living at a tech level about a century prior to this one, or working in a small-town ER with a crime/murder rate that rivaled the worst of the Wild West (but if you have done any of these things, USE them) — ***the odds are spectacular*** that you have lived through things that give you a unique perspective on the world.

These four questions are designed to help you find your way from what you're writing in your story to what has mattered in your life and shaped you as a human being... and from there to the theme that fits your story.

- **Why do I care about this story?**
- **Why do I fear** *[my connection to my story's conflict]?*
- **Why do I care what happens to** *[my characters dealing with this conflict]?*
- **What is my theme?**

Your Turn

What are you writing about that matters to you?

On your THEME worksheet, break your story down as I did, by asking a broad question, and then winnowing down to your theme. (If you need more room to get there, just write in your writing notebook.)

On to Allegory

Once you have your theme, you build your allegory.

What's an allegory?

As a literary device, an allegory is a metaphor in which a character, place or event is used to deliver a broader message about real-world issues and occurrences.”

– [Current definition on Wikipedia \(subject to change\)](#)

You create symbols that stand in for what you mean.

And to keep from being preachy, from shouting what you think from a soapbox, from telling people what they should think, you show rather than telling.

[*The Selling of Suzee Delight*](#) (the second story in *The Longview Chronicles*) contains an allegory about the expansion of government in the name of helping the downtrodden.

The real-world origin of that story was a news article I read some years earlier about a woman in a country where prostitution was legalized being required by her government's employment board to take a job as a prostitute when she could not find a job in her original field.

Suzee was my symbol of what happens to people in a universe where employment is mandatory and prostitution can be a government job.

Suzee was a kid who grew up in poverty and under government care, and who seemed to thrive, becoming rich and famous and in a strange way, beloved — only to murder a handful of top government officials at the height of her career while she was entertaining them. The story is told

against the backdrop of a number of Death Circuses (businesses that broker the sales and executions of high-level criminals) bidding to obtain and sell the rights to Suzee Delight's broadcast execution, while people from one city work desperately to save her life.

To make allegory work, you have to write close to the bone. You have to give people a reason to care about your character, you have to care about her yourself, and you have to show the cost of the thing you're writing against — in this case, the right of any government to force people to take jobs they don't want.

And prostitution is my example because it's a job most people can look at and say, "No, the government doesn't have the right to mandate that anyone be required to take **that** job..." but the allegory is applicable to ANY job.

Because you only get one life that you can prove, and you were not born to spend that life in unwilling servitude to someone else's agenda, or convenience, or perversion.

So that's MY allegory for *The Selling of Suzee Delight*.

How do you find yours?

You look at your theme, as defined in your first worksheet.

And then you ask the following questions:

- *Who is the best person to personify this theme — to make it human?*
- *What is the worst situation in which this character can be placed to show the conflict?*
- *What is the worst outcome this character might face in that situation?*

So my theme for Suzee Delight was:

Here are my demo answers for *Suzee Delight*:

- *Who is the best person to personify this theme — to make it human?*

A smart, beautiful little girl who grew up in a government child-rearing facility, who dreamed of a career in science, and who in spite of having genuine skills in math and science was put into the “personal entertainment” track by a pedophile government employee, and was required to work as a prostitute from childhood on.

- *What is the worst situation in which this character can be placed to show the conflict?*

Life or death — the character must act on what she believes to be right, honest, and ethical, and then must face life or death consequences for the actions she took.

- *What is the worst outcome this character might face in that situation?*

Death by public execution, with hundreds of thousands of people in the arena cheering for her death, and hundreds of billions of people out in the galaxy doing the same. To die knowing that she did the right thing, but was loathed and despised because no one knew why.

Now I have to come up with an allegory for *Dead Man’s Party*.

My theme for *Dead Man’s Party* is:

- That the protection and preservation of individual human rights are the most important work people can engage in.

So to find my allegory, I ask the following questions:

- *Who is the best person to personify this theme — to make it human?*

Amanda is my best character for this. She started out being neither free nor human, and discovered what it meant to be free by falling in love with a free human... and then discovered what it meant to be human by taking over the body of a slaver and becoming human by degrees — though she's not fully there yet.

- *What is the worst situation in which this character can be placed to show the conflict?*

In a story like the one I'm writing, *Life or Death* is the only possible answer — but in this case, it's with a twist. The character was in a form that would have let her survive as long as the engines that powered her world survived — potentially for millions of years. She shed that form and took a human body, eliminating one terrible villain in the process, but now she's in a form that can be easily and permanently killed. She knows she might never find Jaro. She knows she's the target of the monster who made her. So she is the creature who could have lived nearly forever, and who gave that up to be alone and faithful to someone she has never met in person, someone who might never find her.

- *What is the worst outcome this character might face in that situation?*

To die knowing that she never found the man she loved, that she failed in protecting humanity from the monster who made her — to know that she gave up everything to save human kind, and failed in every way.

What's the allegory here?

That humanity is not defined by the body we're born into but by the choices we make, and that a machine that comes to value life and human beings is

more human than a human who wants to own humanity, and who lives to break and destroy the people beneath him.

And a bit more on Life and Death.

If you're writing lighter fiction, or fiction for younger readers, the worst situation in which your main viewpoint character can be placed is likely not going to be **literal** life and death.

But because we are all human, and all finite, some variant of life and death is the deep stakes of almost all fiction.

Let's take happy romances, where the biggest threat seems to be whether the character will go back to Boyfriend A, or move on to Boyfriend B.

The worst outcome is still Life and Death, though it's implied.

It's:

What if she chooses wrong and loses the right guy,
and is stuck with the wrong guy for the rest of her
life?

If you're writing a YA, you're generally not allowed to kill off young protagonists (and even killing off their parents or other sympathetic adults is frequently not allowed) — but the “worst outcome” is still some variant of life or death.

It can be the death of a dream, as it was for me in real life and my dreams of Rock Stardom or Famous Artist-dom. It can be betrayal by one deeply trusted person who matters to your MC, leading to the death of love, or the death of hope, or the death of friendship.

Spend some time thinking about how bad *REALLY BAD* can be in your story, and do not be afraid to hurt your characters to make your allegory stronger.

Your Turn

Now it's time to build out your allegory, to figure out how you're going to show this in your story.

Go to your ALLEGORY worksheet.

Finally, Subtext

If you have theme and allegory in place, you are ready to write the subtext.

Back to the current Wikipedia definition for this:

Subtext or undertone is any content of a creative work which is not announced explicitly by the characters or author, but is implicit or becomes something understood by the observer of the work as the production unfolds. Subtext can also refer to the thoughts and motives of the characters which are only covered in an aside. *Subtext can also be used to imply controversial subjects without specifically alienating people from the fiction, often through use of metaphor.*

- [Wikipedia \(definition subject to change\)](#)

This is the part where things get tricky.

Because it's really difficult to know, for example, that you're writing about the tragedies that welfare imposes on the people trapped in the system, and to NOT flog your point of view.

This was my situation in *Vincalis the Agitator*, a fantasy novel I did for Time-Warner a bunch of years ago.

I built my allegory around the welfare system I saw in the places where I worked as an ER nurse, and around the patients I worked with, and around the cost I saw to the young people trapped inside government subsistence living a couple generations in. Young men who were disposable, not welcomed as fathers or parents, and young women encouraged to get pregnant to get more welfare money, and encouraged not to marry so they could keep getting their monthly government check.

It was a huge, government-sponsored prison from which few escaped. It was hideously destructive of families and lives, and heartbreaking on the personal level, where children with children of their own were diapering babies in trash-bags, and abusing children they weren't mature enough to raise.

While I was writing *Vincalis*, I regularly had to step back, to separate myself from the reality that I was writing about, and focus on burying that inside the metaphor of a magic system where power was pulled straight from the lives of unsuspecting human beings. A soapbox would have been easy, but it wouldn't have been good.

So I kept to the lives of my characters. Having built my allegory, I plotted out the scenes that allowed me to SHOW variations of the horrors I'd seen in real life.

And I kept these scenes in character, and pushed my plot right up to the *Worst Possible Outcome*.

Meanwhile, readers found their own meaning in the story, which is the thing that happens when you use allegory. You're burying a hard real-world truth behind fiction, giving characters problems you care about, but NOT flogging a real-world agenda... and sometimes people pull out meanings that are nothing like what you put in there.

Do a good enough job of burying your subtext and people can quote your fiction to make it look like you're all kinds of folks you aren't.

WARNING: This is a favorite trick of folks who love to write negative reviews about authors they dislike, by the way... Quote something a villain says or does, imply that this is the author's point of view, and that the book supports rather than villifies this philosophy, and shred the author as an evil person.

When this happens to you, it will not be your best day ever.

But we're focusing on writing your fiction to be meaningful not just for yourself, but also for the broadest possible section of your "perfect readers." And writing fiction that CAN matter to people requires that you not tell people what *in your opinion* they're supposed to think, what *in your opinion* they're supposed to believe.

You pull from your experience, from your own pain and fear and grief, and your own hope, and ***you show the truth of the world you've seen*** with metaphor and allegory, and you do the best you can with every single book you write.

Sometimes folks get it.

Sometimes they don't.

The truth of this gig is that you cannot make people think the way you think, and no matter who you are, *most people will not think like you.*

So **most** readers are not going to be YOUR readers, and all you can do from your end to find your perfect readers is:

- Bring the best you have to offer to every book
- Stay off the soapbox with your opinions
- Avoid telling readers what they *should* think
- Show them what you have experienced that has changed you and made you who you are, using allegory and strong characterization and compelling conflict
- Make sure that you're true to yourself
- Give the best of yourself to your characters

Stay focused on telling your story, and make sure that when you're done, *it matters to you.*

Doing that, your perfect readers will find you, and bring others like them to your work.

Next Week...

You'll build (or at least start building) your novel's right voice and tone.

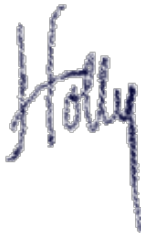
VOICE is “single first person, multiple third person, omniscient, alternating first and third” or some other options.

TONE is funny, snarky, sincere, smart-ass, scary, creepy, romantic, elegant, and anything and everything else writers have been doing since Chaucer sent his gang of pilgrims down the road to seek the Martyr of Canterbury... and to entertain themselves, had each tell a story in his or her own voice. Some are lovely, some are raunchy, but all of them create characters and a world that are deeply and recognizably real.

Chaucer did this so well those stories hold up today—630-ish years later.

You can learn this skill, and next week you'll start putting it to work in your novel.

You can do this!

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Holly". The letters are cursive and fluid, with a long vertical stroke extending from the bottom of the 'y'.

Holly Lisle

Class Creator, *How to Write a Novel*