

How to Write a Novel

LESSON 18



Building, Hiding, and Revealing Core Plot Twists

HOLLY LISLE

<https://HollysWritingClasses.com>

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Intro

Last week you learned the intermediate skill of finding out what happens next in your story.

This week, you're taking "what happens next" and applying techniques to bring it at your reader from unexpected directions — to surprise, amaze, and delight the person you've brought into your world.

Onward.

Life Is Full of Surprises

Good fiction should be, too.

Last week, you learned how to identify *Toys On The Floor* in first draft, and how to put them to work in your novel.

This week, I'm going to show you how to build surprise in while using those toys, and others you'll build.

This is a shorter process than last week (small cheers all around).

You just ask and answer the following questions:

- What do I know that my reader doesn't know?
- What does my reader think he knows that's wrong?
- What does my character know that I don't know?
- What does my character think he knows that's wrong?

Usually, I'd just start in by demoing the questions and answers for you...

BUT...

Having made a massive mess of my first draft last week by discovering that to tell my story, I have to move it to two years after the Fall instead of ten, I'm going to have to now pretend that I got the first thirteen chapters of the book right the first time.

So before I ask those four questions, let me put my characters on my *Revised In My Head Map*:

- I thought my jeweler/super-soldier Andy was in DC when the world Fell. This gives me the following interesting story problems:

- Andy went somewhere with his hijacked body, but where? When I rethought my story last week, I was going to put him out west, because I thought my villain was going to be out west, so that he could work his way across the country...
- But if my villain is out west, that massively decreases the initial danger Amanda is in.
- **Jaro, my love interest, needs to be out west**, because he has to fight to get to her through the worst possible conditions, against a ticking clock and with the villain having massive advantages.
- Meanwhile, my villain needs to be someplace where he can get to Amanda — which means Andy also has to be in the eastern half of the US. somewhere, but that puts him too far from Amanda to be a quick threat.
- And if my villain killed Andy, then Andy has to be somewhere East of the Mississippi as well.
- **So where is Andy?** I'm saying when the world fell apart, he was able to get out of DC in one piece during the Fall, and he ran south to Georgia. Why? Because in a world lit only by fire, it's easier to grow crops in places with longer growing seasons, and easier to stay warm. And Georgia is not densely populated. If you want to survive, you need to be sharing resources with the fewest folks possible, while still having people who will band together with you to protect each other.
- **Meanwhile, where's Bill?** Well, Bill was in his place in Palm Beach during the Fall. Things got deadly, but he's a predator, not prey. He uncovers the identities of the people his traitor Als claimed, and he's working his way north, killing them in the order in which he reaches them.

So if Jaro is out west, what does he have to do to get to Amanda?

Time out while I list the states east of the Mississippi:

1 - Alabama

2 - Connecticut

3 - Delaware

4 - Florida

5 - Georgia

6 - Illinois

7 - Indiana

8 - Kentucky

9 - Maine

10 - Maryland

11 - Massachusetts

12 - Michigan

13 - Mississippi

14 - New Hampshire

15 - New Jersey

16 - New York

17 - North Carolina

18 - Ohio

19 - Pennsylvania

20 - Rhode Island

21 - South Carolina

22 - Tennessee

23 - Vermont

24 - Virginia

25 - West Virginia

26 - Wisconsin

Twenty-six states, which divides the country pretty neatly in half and puts a deadly physical barrier between the two halves, and which makes a Northern Route to get caravans across the country from West to East the best bet, because the Mississippi is narrower the farther north you go.

Narrower expanses mean less cost to build bridges, so more bridges, so a better chance that any given bridge might be lightly defended (or staked out by fewer cannibals).

The great lakes to the north form another natural barrier, as do the brutal Midwest winters, so going far to the north will not be an advantage. But if Jaro started out in California, I can see the Caravan he's on building its route through Oregon, Idaho, Wyoming, South Dakota, and Minnesota to get the Mississippi where it's the narrowest. And having to plan to hit the river in either mid-summer, when the water level is lowest, or in mid-winter, when they might catch a break and be able to cross on ice. They'll probably be arriving at the river in summer, though. They're traveling with cookfires and fire heat, and the far north of the US is killer cold in winter. So traveling through the warm seasons would increase their chances of survival.

Once they get past the Mississippi and its deadly bridges, the Caravan is going to have to travel through northern Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, and Pennsylvania to avoid the Ohio River bridges, (or maybe they skip Pennsylvania by manning up and wiping out the cannibals staking out the

Wheeling bridge before dropping down through West Virginia and western Virginia to get to North Carolina.

Upshot of that? Jaro needs to be pretty close to the Mississippi when this story starts, with a well-developed, well-armed caravan.

So this story starts in summer and ends in autumn. Did not know that until just this minute. Well, autumn is nice. The mountains in North Carolina in autumn are so beautiful they'll make you cry. Lovely place to finish a story, especially if I can bring in a happy ending.

And the scene I wrote last week needs to be set on a bridge crossing from Minnesota to Wisconsin, with the caravan ahead of my guys wiped out by cannibals on the Wisconsin side.

Okay. So now I'm ready to ask my four questions.

Q1: What do I know that my reader doesn't know?

This question focuses on giving your reader something important to wonder about while reading — a curiosity through-line.

I'm going to ask this first one as a question from the reader, and figure out my answer as I write it.

And my reader wants to know:

- Why **cannibals**?

Seriously. I'm asking it too, because right now, I don't know either—but unlike my reader, *I have to know*.

My fingers wrote “cannibals” in that draft last week, and I almost quit right there. This is the US, people are generally pretty decent to each other, and

even when the shit goes down, I'm having a hard time buying American Cannibalism as a major movement. So to posit that some huge part of the population goes cannibal within two years? Really?

But even as I think that, my right brain just this second handed me the answer.

It was a programming glitch when the Underworld broke. One of the most popular Underworld realms was "Cannibals Versus Zombies" where the differences between the two sides was that the zombie side smelled worse and kept having body parts fall off... but couldn't die unless they were eaten, so were always eaten alive. The cannibal side never lost body parts, but could be killed, then eaten.

Both sides were playing to capture and devour each other.

And when Excalibur/Amanda hard-crashed the system, among the hundreds of millions of people who were playing that stupid game, about a third were booted with the game locked in their chip's RAM, because Amanda didn't have the chance to let the program exit gracefully. So world-wide, tens of millions of players were locked inside the game while in the real world. And they continue hunting and eating people – only now for real.

Wow. Right Brain dumped that on me with an evil laugh. She's scary.

So that's my example of what I know that the reader doesn't know.

Your Turn

On your worksheets, ask between one and five “What do I know that my reader doesn’t know?” questions.

(I only did two sheets per question. You can print more if you need them.)

And then let your Right Brain Muse tell you the answers.

Q2: What does my reader think he knows that's wrong?

This question focuses on building in intentional misdirection by allowing the reader to think he knows what's going on with a specific story element while having something entirely different happening with that element just beneath the surface.

I'm going to just come up with something at random here so I can hit a different genre.

Example:

Reader sees character trudging down the road to paint *al fresco* in a meadow. Character has an outdoor easel and some canvases in a hiking pack on his back, a whole slew of palette knives and oil paints in his hip bag, and the machete he'll use to clear a little working space in the meadow.

We watch him clear his space, sit down on his little painting stool and set up, watch him start painting, and then watch some wild-haired, wild-eyed crazy dude screaming as he races up the hill that he's going to kill the painter.

And we watch the thin, fragile-looking artist defend himself against the attack of the bigger, stronger, crazy man, and kill him, though he does get injured in the process.

Reader watches an innocent man narrowly ward off death, right?

Wrong.

I can figure out how this scene is actually a well-staged double murder.

The painter first kills his mistress (a woman who just broke off her affair with him) who is the other man's wife. Puts her body in a trunk in the other man's house (honestly, no human being should ever own a trunk... Writers use them for the most horrible things).

Leaves a note he wrote on her kitchen table, telling her where and when she can meet him so they can run away together.

She never saw the note. Never touched it. But he's counting on no one worrying about that. It looks like it's been read, has been folded and unfolded a dozen times (by the villain, wearing gloves, though he didn't wear gloves when he wrote it). And it will have the fingerprints of the husband on it.

So it'll look like the husband found it before the woman saw it, killed her, then went after the painter. That's going to be the villain's story anyway. That the villain left the many-times folded note on his way out the door.

His story is going to be that he'd spent the night with her. That he wanted to leave early to catch the morning light where he was painting, because she'd been sure the husband would be working a double, and she'd have time to find it and join him before the guy even got home.

This is a lame alibi, by the way, but if you have two dead folks, one of whom definitely tried to kill the villain, and the husband's fingerprints are on the murder weapon — one the villain stole during a cookout he was having with his friends — it's going to be a fairly convincing stage. If folks don't look too deeply into it.

In this story, of course, the hero detective *would* look both deeply and well. :D

Anyway...

Then he goes to the place where he told her he'd be, sets up, and starts painting while he waits for what he expects to happen next. Why is he

painting if he was supposed to be running away with the wife? Dunno, but if I thought about it, I could come up with something.

Yeah. Muse says, *This scene was the place where they made love most often, and he's going to say he wanted to paint this exact scene for her as a gift.*

And the innocent guy, who doesn't know his wife is dead because the real killer was very neat about it, comes up over the hill, screaming that he's going to kill his old friend.

Who kills him with that machete, and then calls the police.

*What does my reader **think** he knows that's wrong?* is a workhorse question. You can plot your way through a whole book with just this one question. Though it would get a bit repetitive and stale if you did that.

Your Turn

On your worksheets, ask between one and five "What does my reader think he know's that's wrong?" questions.

And then let your Right Brain Muse tell you the answers.

Q3: What does my character know that I don't know?

This question digs into your ability to become your various characters.

So I'm going to look at Amanda, Andy, Jaro, and Bill here, and slip inside their skins for a couple minutes each, and let them talk to me through their own words.

AMANDA: I know that I didn't understand pain when I became human. I had to learn it once I was inside the body. I would accidentally cut myself, and the feeling of doing that was just another feeling, and when everything felt strange (because everything included sensations), I couldn't understand which sensations were important, which were trivial.

It was full-sensory overload, with no way to dial down the irrelevant stuff, no way to turn off smell and taste and touch and sound ever.

Initially I wanted to just roll up in a silent room with the lights off. But I couldn't.

I had to run, had to hide, and I had to do it in the midst of the very first chaos I could not control.

I had no clue about that. It came out of nowhere the second I typed Amanda's name and typed the word *I*.

So now Andy, who currently carries the second biggest part of the story, though now that I know more about Jaro (from LAST lesson's revelations), I might split the remaining scenes in rough thirds, with Bill as a brief blip in between those thirds. But **anyway...**

ANDY: I know that I could talk to the guy whose body I was wearing up until Bill killed him. We were a team. He was happy to have me, because I never slept, could...

OMG! I didn't jump into him. I was already implanted in him. I was an intentional part of the Super-Soldier program, a complete second intelligence that could have maps and missions and codes and protocols and languages, that could connect directly into the human's body, could override it during emergencies. This guy and I were actually friends, because I'd been designed to be the best friend the guy could ever have. I was designed to be an essential part of the system that would save his life.

So how did I so completely fail him when Bill showed up. How did I let him be killed?

I don't know, but I know that when I lost him, I lost the only friend I'd ever known, and half of myself that I can't get back.

See? This completely blew me away. This prototype team had already been accessing the Underworld, had been doing test field work, had been part of the agenda of someone who...

...hmmmm...

Didn't trust the Underworld, who knew the Underworld had to go. Do I know who that is?

No. Not yet. But that person is still alive, is aware of Excalibur, developed the Andy chip to work around it. <sigh> This novel could run so far over my intended 50,000 words if I would let it. I won't.

I don't *Dead Man's Party* is the sort of book my readers are looking for from me. I'll revise it and publish it, and if it is, there's probably more of that world where that story came from. But I'm looking at this right now as a 50,000-word one-off.

Still, there's so much more to this story, and every time I ask the right questions, I find out things that pull me in deeper.

Onward.

What does Jaro know that I don't know?

JARO: Knows the titles of the books he read that gave him what he needed to put in front of Amanda to help her understand that what she was doing was genuinely evil. And a quick search took me to *On Liberty*, by John Stuart Mill – something I'd read years ago, and which I rebought after carefully checking to make sure the book was legit (Amazon has some versions that are completely wrecked by "publishers" who went through and changed all the words into complete nonsense – if you're interested, purchase with care.)

So Jaro read *On Liberty* and used what he learned from it to win over Amanda. And I'll need to run back through and find some key points that I can bring into the story during my revision.

And I just realized I did this wrong. I was supposed to write this in Jaro's voice. I still got something good out of the exercise, but writing it in his voice... I might have found something different. I'm going to let this stand so that you can see that I made a mistake, and get a feel for how that error may have changed the results I got.

Finally, I have to get inside the head of my villain. This is the one that's always tempting to do in third person, but let me be Bill for a bit, and let him tell me what I don't know about him.

BILL: I know that I was a sickly kid, scrawny, weak, homely – they actually had my DNA tested to see if someone had swapped me out for their "real" child in the very exclusive private birthing center where I and my brother and sister were born.

My parents were rich, and loved my athletic older brother and my gorgeous younger sister. But me – I was the embarrassment. Smart... but that was it.

So while my parents traveled around Europe and Asia and Africa and South America with my brother and sister, I stayed home with tutors and nannies. And science, which didn't care if I was weak or susceptible to every virus that floated past my nose.

I focused on building virtual reality technology that gave me a place where I was the strongest. The best.

It wasn't until I developed neurochipping, however, that I came into my own.

I figured out how to connect the neurochip to my Underworld. Ditched the external equipment, created an interface that kept me from ever having to step inside what I'd built while still giving me total control of what happened in there, and then charged a fortune for the first exclusive memberships to my Underworld, where the ultra-rich could live like gods.

My own family, of course, got to join for free.

And along with everyone else, they became my slaves.

And then I discovered that a keto diet and exercise changed me from that scrawny, sickly man I'd become into someone as healthy as my big brother had been.

And then I killed him.

This is all new info to me.

It gives me an excellent model for “how to build a psychopath.”

And tells me that the first folks my psychopath works out his rage on are those closest to him. After which he moves his circle of damage outward.

Your Turn

Ask “What does my character know that I don’t know” for each of your primary story characters .

And let them answer in first person.

Q4: What does my character think he knows that's wrong?

There are two important essential addenda to this question.

- The thing your character thinks he knows that's wrong has to be something important. **You don't have to know why it's important** when you write it. You just have to know that it is.
- You only need to have one character who believes he knows something important that's wrong... but you need to give yourself an opportunity to find the BEST mistaken belief.

So...

So I have four characters for whom I need to discover something that each believes, which is both important to the story, and wrong.

I can't ask my characters. By definition, they don't know, and CANNOT know. So this is NOT a first-person exercise.

This is done in third person omniscient, and may be written with a bit of tongue in cheek, if that will help you get to the heart of why this matters.

So to do that, you pull out that old chestnut of early fiction, the voice of the omniscient narrator.

Who says:

[Character] thinks [X] is true. Little does he or she know...

So in we go again, this time in third person present tense omniscient.

And I really only need one of these — the best one. But to get the BEST one, I have to do all four.

So...

Amanda thinks Bill knows who she is — that is, that he knows the human body in which she's hiding.

Little does she know that Bill thinks the body she took is one that's hiding all the way up in Maine... and that he's saving that murder for last, hoping to cause Excalibur the greatest despair and fear by destroying each of her allies before he finally destroys her.

In fact, the body Amanda is in is on his list of people to kill, but much earlier in his list. When he kills her, he won't even know he succeeded in the most important part of his quest — the destruction of the slave who betrayed him and brought down the system that let him be God.

Next...

Andy thinks he's managed to preserve the body he's in, and that he'll be able to keep it running even though the guy who was his partner in it is dead.

Little does he know that while he's managed to keep the electrical and circulatory systems running, the fact is that he's not doing a good enough or regular enough job of bringing in and circulating oxygen... so all he's accomplished is to buy himself some time. The body is going to mummify, the electrical and circulatory systems are going to stop, and he's going to be stuck in his chip inside a mummified corpse until the power cell that runs him finally runs out — in maybe a century or three.

And after that...

Jaro thinks the cannibals are people who are starving, and that if they could be give regular food, they would quit being cannibals.

Little does he know that they are now hard-wired, programmed cannibals – creatures incapable of thinking, reasoning, incapable of mercy or love or compassion. They are trapped inside the game, which is their only reality, and they cannot be saved.

God, this is a grim story.

I woke up this morning thinking I needed to figure out a way in revision to make this novel funny – or at least funny in places. Kind of “Terry Pratchett versus the Man-Made Zombie Hell”.

And then I get THIS stuff.

So now along with everything else, I need in the back of my mind to start looking for the humor in this horrible situation.

Anyway... on to my villain.

Bill thinks Excalibur is embedded inside a socialite up in Maine who met and detested him, and who figured out who he was and what we was doing when she and he met during a promotional party she hosted for him when he was promoting the Underworld to the rich and beautiful up in Cumberland Foreside.

Little does he know that Amanda is his actual target, and that while the socialite up in Maine has a bunker and machine gun nests and a bunch of folks who are friends and allies from the area, and she’s ready for him, Amanda is only five spots away from the next planned victim on his hit list.

Your Turn

So... Last set of worksheets. I don't know which of these I'll use. Maybe all four. I like them all (in a "where in my mind does this stuff come from?!" sort of way) and I can use them all.

Definitely using the Bill one, though. That's gold.

Next Week...

Next time, we'll go into Story Fitting — making sure you have enough good stuff, and figuring out how to keep that good stuff on target without getting distracted by side trips into... oh, the history of Cannibalism in post-Fall America, or the Secret Story of the Socialite in Cumberland Foreside, Maine, or the Jaro's Step-By-Step Route from the Mississippi Crossing to Tiny Town, North Carolina... things that made *my* Muse's ears twitch.

You can do this!

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Holly".

Holly Lisle

Class Creator, *How to Write a Novel*