

## Ideas on Story and Structure from Best Sellers

From James Scott Bell, a thriller writer and lawyer, has a course at the Great Courses on writing a best seller:

Bell focuses, unsurprisingly for thrillers and mysteries, on story/plot sources and then on structure: something he calls the LOCK system.

I.

First, he suggests how to get a good story:

- *What-If Moments:* We all have crazy what-if thoughts that cross our minds from time to time. Likely, most of us simply just laugh them off. Try making the most of what-if moments. The next time you wonder, “What if this plant I'm looking at suddenly started talking to me?”—roll with it. What would it say? Would you talk back or run away? There is a story here.
- *Weird Job Situations:* Giving people insight into the daily life that only a few select people could provide can be a fascinating read. And putting your characters in jobs with tremendous tension helps keep your reader on edge. What does a day in the life of a bomb disposal technician look like? How does this person deal with facing death on a regular basis? Would she try to find love and start a family? There is a story here.
- *Hear the Headlines:* But don't go much further than the headlines. Work with just a limited amount of information and use your imagination to fill in the details. “Scientists Discover New Fish That Walks on Land.” What would that look like? Do you go fishing or hunting? There is a story here.
- *The First-Line Game.* As Mr. Bell points out throughout the course, the first sentence of a novel is one of the most important. One good line can not only hook your reader into buying the book, it can hook you into a story you never imagined. Experiment with fun, funny, weird, cool, intriguing first lines and see where they take you. “Today I learned you should never travel to Jupiter without an extra pair of underpants.” Who is going to Jupiter? Why underpants? Wait, WHAT? There is a story here.

Don't get caught up in the realities of our world, the illogic of your ideas, or the fear that someone might laugh. Audiences are eager to suspend their disbelief for a world that captures their imagination. It's just like Field of Dreams claimed: “If you build it, they will come.” Remember, at some point, Michael Crichton wondered, “What if a mosquito that was stuck in a rock resulted in an amusement park full of real-life dinosaurs? There is a story here...”

II.

His "LOCK" system provides structure as he sees it:

**L - Lead:** Your protagonist can be:

- positive—the hero, someone who embodies moral codes of a community, someone who readers root for;
- negative—does not adhere to the moral code, we root for them to change or to get their just desserts; or an
- anti-hero—has own morals, usually dragged into a community kicking and screaming. You want to bond your reader to your lead by putting them in a terrible situation, a hardship, or inner conflict to evoke sympathy or empathy.

**O - Objective:** Your lead has a mission: to get something or get away from something.

**C - Confrontation:** Ramp up engagement by pitting opposition and/or outside forces against the lead accomplishing his or her objective.

**K - Knockout:** Give your reader a satisfying conclusion that resonates. There are five fundamental endings to best sellers. You will probably recognize them from movies and television shows as well:

Lead wins, gains objective;

Lead loses, missing objective;

Lead loses objective, gains something else of value;

Lead wins objective, loses something of value; or

Open/ambiguous ending.

Once you've locked in your LOCK, you have the start of a best seller.

"As Mickey Spillane noted, 'The first chapter sells the book. The last chapter sells the next book.'"