

Point-of-View Problems: From a Thriller-in-Progress

Consider this passage from a thriller-in-progress. The main character is in Eastern Europe, and he has just picked up a woman in a bar. She offers him drugs:

“I like you, Jim,” she said. “Look, I give you this. We have big fun.” She brought a pill bottle out of her bag and offered him a small white pill. At that moment, the bar’s strobe light came on again. He had never liked strobe lights. She moved closer to him so that he smelled her perfume. She pressed her breasts against his arm. “Go on, you like these.” She breathed heavily in his ear.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Try it, you like,” she repeated.

He pulled away from her and looked into her eyes, large moist brown eyes ringed in purple eye shadow.

“Sorry, babe,” he said. “I don’t do pills. I’ll have another shot of Jack Daniels, though.”

The strobe lights kept flashing as Jim’s drink came. It seemed like they would never go off. He put his hand to his face, shielding his eyes, so he didn’t see her drop a small pill into the shot glass.

The strobes’ fiery lightning bolts stopped and the bar returned to its blackness. Jim poured the whisky *and the pill* down his throat in one gulp.

He grabbed at her ass as they left the bar, and the next thing Jim knew, he was waking in a dark room with his arms and legs held immobile and a terrible headache...

Jim is the main character and the woman’s function is to drug him for plot reasons. We follow Jim very closely, getting his sense impressions, getting him blinded by the strobe lights with him. The question the writer should ask is: Why do we know something that Jim doesn’t know and can’t see happening? There may be a reason- maybe the writer has suddenly decided that the woman should be an important character, and is perhaps switching over to her point of view. If that’s true, it is likely that the next scene won’t be Jim waking up a prisoner but rather the woman going about her spy business. But I think this scene was really meant simply to show Jim falling for the oldest trick in the book, the seductive woman. I think the writer is really interested in Jim and his story, and that the momentary omniscience, the telling of something that Jim explicitly does not see- the drug being slipped in his drink, the pill going down with the Jack Daniels- was merely done to get Jim drugged. Moreover, this particular scene would be very easy to revise and keep to Jim’s point of view. All the writer has to do is emphasize the strobes, and then cut to Jim waking and realizing what has happened. Here is that last part of the scene:

“Sorry, babe,” he said. “I don’t do pills. I will have another shot of Jack Daniels, though.”

The strobe lights kept flashing. It seemed like they would never go off, and Jim shielded his face. For a moment, he lost sight of her, but then his drink arrived.

Then the strobes’ fiery lightning bolts stopped and the bar returned to

its blackness. Jim poured the whisky down his throat in one gulp. He grabbed at her ass as they left the bar, and the next thing Jim knew, he was waking in a dark room with his arms and legs held immobile and a terrible headache...

The point here is not to get in the way of your drafting: if you have a sudden great idea for how the main character gets drugged, write it as it comes, but keep in mind that a scene like this (even if other sections of the novel are from other points of view) will likely work more smoothly if we stay with one character's experience. It helps create the illusion that we readers are in the moment, and it also helps with plot in that Jim doesn't know, but can probably figure out, what happened to him, so you get a little extra plot suspense too.

The movie version may well show the woman dropping the pill in Jim's drink, but the movies tend toward an objective point of view. They are great at speeding up our heartbeat, and less great at having us feel the physical sensations the protagonist feels.